スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❺

戦え！ぼくらの大神官

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 5

Fight! Our Great High Priest!

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The Inverse Board Of Education

One day, on a certain date: We ran out of travel funds.

"What are you going to do, Lina!?"

"It’s not 'what am I going to do'! It's your fault, Naga! You’re the one who kept ordering refills of brandy by the mug yesterday, calling it a 'pre-celebration'!"

"Hah! Don't make me laugh, Lina Inverse! Who was it that said, 'We're about to come into a big sum of money, so let's live it up'!?"

"Ah! That was...! I... I just didn't think the bandit gang would have moved out..."

I knew that losing your nerve means losing the argument, but I couldn't help whispering. We were in a forest on the outskirts of a certain village, on our way back to the inn empty-handed. I’d heard a rumor that a bandit group had a hideout here and were loaded with loot. I showed up with a grin on my face only to find the place deserted—not a single copper coin left behind.

Aaaargh! I was looking forward to annihilating them! You bandits! What do you mean, you moved!?

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! This is what happens when you rely on mere rumors without doing your research! Well? Have you learned your lesson?"

"It’s not 'learned my lesson'! For starters, Naga, even you are going to have trouble finding a meal starting tomorrow—no, starting tonight!"

"Ugh...! When you put it that way... I’ve got it, Lina! We'll just sell off the valuables in your luggage back at the inn—"

"Rejected."

"Hmph... Narrow-minded as always."

"It’s not a matter of being narrow-minded! You’re always relying on other people's finances! For once, go find some work yourself!"

Of course—I would soon come to deeply regret those impulsive words.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I finally found it, Lina Inverse! A delicious job!"

Naga's idiotic laughter echoed the next day. It happened just as I was giving a string of painful excuses to the old man who came to collect the inn fees.

"...A... job...?"

Ignoring my twitching face, Naga slapped the innkeeper on the shoulder. *Whack!*

"Hah! Leave it to Naga the White Serpent! Once this job is over, I'll pay the inn fees—with interest!"

"...R-really...?" the old man muttered, a look of blatant suspicion on his face.

"Hah! I swear it on my pride!"

Do you even have any? Pride, I mean.

The old man looked even more uneasy at her words, but apparently, he didn't have the guts to argue with her. He retreated, grumbling something under his breath.

"Hah. Now, Lina, let's talk about the job! Actually, the client is already downstairs."

Feeling an endless sense of forebveness, but with the innkeeper watching, I reluctantly followed Naga downstairs.

"To tell you the truth, my request is nothing complicated. I simply want you to make a man out of my dear son, Jeffrey. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The moment Naga and I sat down, a high-frequency assault of non-negotiable chatter hit my ears!

...G-gahhhh...

She was probably around forty. A bit plump, with every single finger on both hands gaudily decorated with gold rings! No doubt about it. This was one of those legendary "Self-Proclaimed Ladies of High Society" who are said to be born solely to scatter chaos and discomfort throughout the world!

Never get involved with this type. Even my sister back home used to tell me that, her face turning pale.

"...U-um..." I finally managed to open my mouth timidly. "About 'making your son a

man'... Naga here might dress like that, but we're not in *that* kind of business..."

"My goodnesssssss! What a thing to say!?"

Even faster than Naga could retort, the lady raised her shrill voice again.

"Who would let my precious Jeffrey do something so filthy!? For starters, my Jeffrey is..."

And so, the lady's high-frequency sonic attack continued on and on.

"...Hah... Quite a good job, isn't it, Lina?"

"...Upii... poh..."

"Thirty gold coins each just for that! Ho-ho-ho! Even if I found it myself, what a delicious j-o-b!"

"...Temuu... wahii..."

"Lina! Are you even listening!?"

"...Puhii... ah... No, it's just... the damage from that woman's sonic attack... But Naga, how are you so fine? My head is killing me..."

"Hah. You're still naive, Lina." Naga flipped her hair back in her usual chest-out pose. "When I first talked to her, I actually threw up!"

...Don't brag about that... please...

"—If you want, shall I give you the details of that moment?"

"...No... stop... please..."

That lady—I think her ridiculous name was Josephine—her laughter was really something else. Naga's laughter just rings in your head, but Josephine's feels like it paralyzes the core of your brain. *Maybe that's what a 'bad trip' feels like...*

For the sake of mental hygiene, I'll avoid quoting her request directly, but basically: her son Jeffrey wants to go to a big city and become a knight serving the castle, but he has zero experience. She could use her connections and money to get him a commission, but it's obvious his colleagues would bully him mercilessly.

Therefore, under the support of Naga and me, he was to get some "field education" by defeating a bandit gang to gain some prestige. Of course, Jeffrey would take all the credit. The 100 gold coin reward included "hush money" to ensure we never told a soul.

To be blunt, it was the absolute worst kind of request.

"...But Naga, why did you take such a rotten job!? No matter what, I have no intention of accepting—"

But at my words, Naga looked at me blankly.

"...What are you talking about, Lina? You said with your own mouth just now that you'd take it."

"...Eh...?"

...Wait... wait?

"...Come to think of it... I was so sick of listening to her that I was just nodding along randomly... Could it be...?"

Under my pleading gaze, Naga simply gave a slow, solemn nod.

"Hello. I am Jeffrey Mailstar."

The next day, the person who appeared before Naga and me as we were finishing a meal at the dining hall was a young man around twenty years old. He was a bit short for a man and had a spindly look to him. Rather than a knight-to-be, he looked more like an unhealthy apprentice mage.

...I see... he definitely looks like the type who would be bullied the second he joined a knighthood.

"Mama told me to exterminate villains with you..."

...Mama? Really, kid?

By the way, these "villains" were, of course, plants hired by Auntie Josephine. They were supposed to be "tough" but ultimately get beaten and run away. Jeffrey, of course, didn't know this. The location was the former bandit hideout where we had struck out earlier.

After Naga and I introduced ourselves, I spoke while bringing a cup of herbal tea to my lips.

"So, first let's have a briefing... Jeffrey, about your skill—*Pffft!*"

I barely managed to stop myself from spraying my tea. Quite a bit behind Jeffrey, peeking out from behind a potted plant at the entrance, was a blatantly suspicious

figure!

...J-Josephine-san... probably.

I say "probably" because she was wearing a full-head mask. *I get that you're worried about your kid, but that's way too suspicious...*

"...Is something wrong, Lina-san?"

As Jeffrey asked, I waved my hands frantically.

"N-n-nothing! I just choked on my tea! Anyway! We need to know your true strength. The enemy will almost certainly outnumber us. We need a strategy, and for that, we need to know our overall capabilities."

Of course, even if the enemy weren't plants, they'd be no match for me, Lina Inverse. I could just spam attack spells until they were wiped out. But the goal was to support Jeffrey—to give him confidence and teach him the "know-how" of real combat.

"Don't worry. No matter how many enemies appear, I'll cut them all down with this sword!" Jeffrey puffed out his chest and rested his hand on his rapier.

"That's some confidence... But you have no real experience, so where does that confidence come from?"

"That's obvious!" Jeffrey declared grandly. "Mama guaranteed that I'd be just fine!"

I clutched my head. Naga snorted and laughed in his face.

"Hah! You're still green, boy! No matter what your family says, they're biased! No matter what your mother says, a hack is a ha—"

BOGUO!

A blow from a club struck the back of Naga's head, sending her face-planting into the table! Behind her, of course, was the masked Josephine-san, club in hand and breathing heavily.

"I won't permit anyone speaking ill of my Jeffrey! Jeffrey's swordsmanship is truly magnificent!"

...Seriously... you old hag...

"...Um, excuse me, but who are you?" Jeffrey asked timidly.

...Notice it already, kid...

Josephine-san waved her hands frantically.

"Oh my, don't mind me! I'm just a passerby. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I'll be going now!"

With that, she scurried away and hid behind the potted plant again. After a moment of silence, Jeffrey said in a calm tone:

"...It seems she was just a passerby."

"...Are you... saying that seriously...?"

"Well, hasn't it been a common thing since ancient times? A masked passerby appears whenever something happens, knocks someone down, and leaves."

...Has that woman been doing this since he was a kid?

"...Usually, no... that doesn't happen..." I muttered, enduring a sense of infinite exhaustion.

"Oh? Is that so? Then I suppose it must be a local custom around here."

...It's NOT...

But of course, I didn't even have the energy left to argue.

"We're almost there. Stay sharp."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! This ge—*gugh!*"

I kicked Naga down without hesitation as she started her high-pitched laugh.

"Surprise is the rule when outnumbered. Don't go laughing like that."

Jeffrey nodded.

"Come on, what's the big deal? You and I could handle a bandit gang or two—"

"Listen!" I whispered into Naga's ear so Jeffrey couldn't hear. "What good does it do if *we* do all the work!? Did you forget the goal of this mission!?"

"...Ah... right..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing." I brushed him off. "By the way, Jeffrey, what kind of strategy would you use in this situation? Assuming I can use magic and swords, and Naga is magic-only."

"Let's see... If it were me..." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I'd announce my name

and charge in from the front, slashing through the fodder one by one in a magnificent advance! But the bandit leader would cowardly take Lina-san hostage. However, with my quick wit, I'd save her and defeat the boss. But I wouldn't kill him. The bandits would reform, and I'd become famous instantly! How's that!?"

"...'How's that'... kid... I don't think people usually call that a strategy..."

"Wait a minute. What about my big scene?" Naga protested.

"Of course, there is one," Jeffrey nodded. "Actually, Naga-san is a spy hired by the bandits who feared my power. Because of that, I fall into a pinch, but a reformed Naga-san saves me and ends up taking her own life. It's the most emotional part of the plan!"

"Alright, adopted! I like the part where Naga dies!"

"Hey, Lina! Don't just adopt it! Why should I... No, before that, boy, that's not a strategy! It's the plot of a third-rate minstrel's song—"

DAGOSHI!

The masked Josephine-san appeared out of nowhere and struck Naga with a mace.

"...Old hag... you followed us all the way here?"

"Jeffrey has always been a veeeeery clever boy! There's no way his strategy could be wrong! Right!?"

Having said her piece, she noticed Jeffrey’s gaze.

"Ah, don't mind me. I'm just a passerby. Ho-ho-ho-ho! Excuse me!" She hid behind a nearby tree.

Jeffrey looked slightly surprised. "...There are people who travel in places like this, aren't there?"

"...Are you... serious?"

"...Is something unnatural about it?"

.....

I wanted to snap at him so badly, but I knew if I said the wrong thing, Josephine-san’s attack would come flying.

"What on earth was that just now?" Naga asked, having resurrected as usual.

"...Be careful... Josephine-san is hiding nearby. If you insult Jeffrey, you're getting a hit

to the back of the head..."

Naga's face twitched at my whisper. "...But surely, Lina, you aren't *really* going to use Jeffrey's 'strategy'..."

"Of course not," I said, returning to a normal tone. "Ah, Jeffrey, your 'strategy' is certainly nice... but it'd be more helpful if Naga and I were active too. Since we can use attack spells, I think it's better to blast the hideout first, and while they're in chaos, we charge in."

"I see." Jeffrey clapped his hands. "So you've slightly improved my plan."

Where in the world is the 'slightly' in that improvement?

As I endured the urge to snap, Naga whispered in my ear. "...You were lucky, Lina."

"About what?"

"...Didn't you notice? If Jeffrey's 'I see' had been a second later, Josephine-san's flail would have been embedded in your skull."

...!? A chill ran down my spine. *W-when did she...!? To not let me sense her presence... Josephine-san is terrifying!*

While we were doing that—

"Hey! You! Where do you think you're going!?"

We were discovered by the "enemy" lookout.

Two men appeared, looking like typical thugs. I didn't know where she found them, but the casting was excellent.

"Here I come, villains!" Jeffrey unsheathed his rapier and charged. Of course, the strategy from earlier was long gone from his head.

"Toh!" Silver light cut through the air. ...Only the air.

You're terrible... I swallowed the words. Speed, power, timing—everything was off. The "bandit" actor didn't even feel like getting hit because he was so bad; he just dodged with a mocking smirk.

After swinging his sword uselessly for a while, Jeffrey gasped for breath. "...Heh, you're pretty good! To struggle against me, you must be a legendary warrior!"

The two men wore blatantly mocking grins. "Heh. Don't talk rot, you hack."

GOGIGAN!

In that instant, Josephine appeared again with a morning star and flattened the "actors." Oh. They're twitching. ...That... actually looks like it hurt...

"How dare you say such things to my Jeffrey!? Get hit properly! Isn't that just common courtesy!? By the way, I'm just a passerby!"

She hid again. Jeffrey smiled brightly at us. "Well, that's about what happens when I get serious."

What is 'what happens'... I couldn't say it out loud.

"Come! The enemy hideout is near!" Jeffrey shouted with unnecessary energy.

"So you're here... looks like those two got taken out..."

The man who spoke was likely the "boss" actor. He looked genuinely fierce. By the time the three of us (plus one) arrived, the actors were already waiting.

I see. So the lookout was actually a trio. Two stayed behind to stall us while one ran back to warn the hideout. A very realistic setup.

"Are you here to rescue them?"

"Them?" I asked. Had they set up a hostage situation? They didn't need to go that far...

The "boss" continued. "When we got back, five or six weird punks were acting like they owned the place. We tied 'em up and threw 'em in the back... you know them?"

...Wait a minute...

"...Um... excuse me..." I asked timidly. "Are you guys... real bandits?"

"Ha! Who would pretend to be a bandit!?"

...I see...

Apparently, these bandits had just moved temporarily, and while they were gone, Josephine’s fake bandits had set up shop. Then the real ones came back at the worst possible time.

"If you don't have business, get lost—is what I'd say, but since you took out two of my men, I can't let you slide." The boss drew a scimitar.

"Don't make me laugh!" Jeffrey's voice rang out. "I don't know the circumstances, but

villains like you are no match for my rapier! Prepare yourselves!"

He charged in! *You idiot! What can you do with your skill level!?*

"Tuoh!" As expected, every one of Jeffrey's strikes was easily parried.

"Hehehe! What's wrong! You talk big but you're a total amateur!"

"How dare you speak to Jeffrey like that!?"

But before Josephine's warhammer could crush the boss's head, another bandit blocked it.

"Let go! How rude! This is why uneducated people..."

"Silence her." At the boss's word, a bandit struck Josephine, knocking her out.

"Guh..."

"Ah! Ms. Passerby!" Jeffrey cried.

"...What's with this woman... Gack!" While the boss was distracted, Jeffrey's sword accidentally grazed his cheek. A thin line of red blood flowed.

Wait! Blood is bad! By the time I thought it, it was too late.

"*Hau...*"

Naga and Jeffrey both fainted at the same time.

"Why are *you* the ones falling!?" I snapped at Jeffrey, knowing he couldn't hear. *Sigh... fine.*

"...I don't know what's going on, but you're the only one left. Now, what'll it be!?"

"Fireball."

DADOGOON!

"*Gyaaaaa!*" Most of the fodder behind the boss were blown away by my single Fireball.

"Wh-what!? What was that!?" While the boss panicked, I launched the second wave.

"Flare Arrow!" The bandits were in total panic.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Truly pathetic!" Naga had resurrected and was laughing.

"You haven't done anything yet!"

"I'm doing it now! Ice Arrow!"

Seeing they were no match, most of the bandits fled. Only the boss and a few others remained.

"Hey! You guys!? ...Dammit! I won't lose!" He grabbed the unconscious Jeffrey and held a sword to his throat.

"Crap!"

"...U... u... n..." Jeffrey finally started to wake up. "...Wha... what... Hah!?"

"Stay still, kid! Listen, girls, if you want this man's life, stop resisting!"

...H-how pathetic...

"Naga! Get to the side!"

"Okay!" She circled around.

"I said don't move! Or do you not care what happens to this guy!?"

"Help meeeee! Lina-san! Naga-saaaan!"

...Are you a princess from an old legend or something... kid... Well, I wasn't expecting anything anyway...

"Hah. Want to know?" I said, slowly closing in on the boss. "—What we're about to do?"

"I told you I'll kill him if you try anything!" the boss screamed.

But in a calm voice, I said, "I'll tell you..." I pointed sharply at Naga. "She's going to strip."

"*WHAAAAAAAT!?*" Everyone turned to look at her in unison.

Now!

"Inverse Screw Crush!"

GOGE!

My flying kick landed squarely on the boss's head.

...Men... are such sad creatures...

And so, the incomprehensible battle ended. I should add that the bandits' treasure wasn't all that impressive.

"...Now do you understand, Jeffrey?" I told him. "Your skill is still far, far from enough."

I made sure Josephine-san was still unconscious before saying this.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Lina is absolutely right! You're not cut out for this business at all!" Naga said in a haughty tone.

"It's true that compared to you, Lina-san and Naga-san, I am still a novice." Jeffrey said, looking us straight in the eye. It seemed he finally saw himself for who he was.

"...But... no, that's exactly why I understand that you're saying such things out of jealousy for my talent!"

ZUDOGOON!

Naga and I both face-faulted.

"But because of this, I've gained confidence!"

CHUGODUM!

A secondary explosion.

"With this talent that scares even me, I will surely one day seize the title of the Knight among Knights! Are you listening!? Lina-san! Naga-san!"

Of course—Naga and I no longer had the energy left even to face-fault...

And so, the incident ended. Our pockets were heavier, but our brains felt strangely cold. Wishing that Jeffrey would be bullied until the end of his days once he joined the knighthood, Naga and I left the village behind...

...The world is coming to an end...

(Inverse Board of Education: End)

Operation Rescue

"Actually—my daughter has been kidnapped."

"Ho-hooo."

At Mr. Karl’s words, my fork momentarily stopped mid-air.

We were in Maleneid City, a relatively large and bustling commercial town. As per usual, Naga and I were in the middle of our usual comedy routine over a meal at a local tavern when we were suddenly approached. Lured by the promise of a reward, we found ourselves here: the estate of Karl Bryan, the town’s wealthiest merchant.

We were served a meal, and while we were picking at it, the master of the house appeared and dropped that bombshell as his very first sentence.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," I said, just to be sure. "But... you aren't suffering from senile dementia, are you?"

"...Why on earth would I be senile!?" Mr. Karl snapped back, looking offended.

He was a stout man in his fifties with hair so white it was hard to tell if it was silver or grey. Standing stiffly beside him like a statue was another man of about the same age—the butler, no doubt. He was the one who had scouted us in town.

"No, well... we’ve had some 'interesting' experiences before," I muttered, poking at my chicken steak.

"The kidnappers told me not to inform the town guards," Karl continued. "They demanded ten thousand gold coins as ransom..."

"Ten...!"

"Ten thousand!?"

To put it bluntly, that’s an amount you could live on comfortably for the rest of your life.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I understand!" Naga declared, striking a pose. "This Naga the White Serpent will surely embezzle... I mean, safely deliver those ten thousand gold coins to the culprits!"

The look in her eyes was already far from normal.

"No, no! That’s not it!" Mr. Karl interjected, throwing cold water on Naga’s excitement.

"...Meaning?" I asked calmly.

"You see, I don't mean to brag, but I am one of the top two wealthiest men in this town. I certainly possess assets worth ten thousand gold coins. However—that is strictly speaking about 'assets'."

I see.

"If I sold my shops, merchandise, house, and land, I could easily raise ten thousand. But that’s only if I can sell them. They’ve given me a ten-day deadline. It’s simply impossible to liquidate that much into cash in such a short time."

"I see..." I nodded deeply while gnawing on some wine-roasted lamb. "I think I get the gist of it."

"I appreciate your understanding..." Karl sighed heavily.

"Hmph. So it's like this," Naga chimed in, gulping down brandy as usual. "Your daughter is a hostage. You can't pay the full amount. Her life is in danger. If the kidnappers are going to kill her anyway, you’d rather do it with your own hands—"

Mr. Karl slowly turned only his head toward the butler. "...Hey... do you think we picked the wrong people for the job?"

"I am inclined to agree, sir."

"Wait! She's just drunk! Please ignore her!" I followed up frantically. "So—basically, you want us to rescue your daughter..."

"Exactly," Karl nodded, still looking a bit miffed.

"Do you have any leads?"

"Well... for several years now, there’s been a sorcerer of unknown origin living in the mountains quite far to the west..."

"And you think it's his doing?"

"Well... it’s not certain, but when we had the dogs track my daughter's scent, the trail went cold at a river near there. Of course, it’s possible the real culprit is someone else trying to frame the sorcerer, but there's no way to be sure. We can hardly just go and ask him..."

"Right. So first we scout the area, and if she's been taken there, we rescue her."

"Precisely."

"By the way—what does your daughter look like?"

At my question, Karl’s face softened slightly. "Her name is Rayleigh. She was born late in my life and is only seven. She has silver hair and is a lovely girl who takes after me."

There’s no logical way a girl who takes after this old man could be 'lovely,' but that’s just how the world works. She’s probably a cute girl who looks nothing like him.

"Understood—we'll see what we can do. Now—excuse me for being blunt, but about the reward—"

"Right... expenses plus, if you succeed, fifty gold coins for each of you. How does that sound?"

"*Fif—!?*"

Naga and I were momentarily speechless. That was a massive sum.

"U-understood..." I managed to squeeze the words out while suppressing my internal shock. "By the way, about the success conditions... 'dead or alive' isn't an option, is it? Just checking..."

Karl’s neck creaked as he turned back to the butler. "Hey... I *really* think we picked the wrong people."

"I am inclined to agree, sir."

In the middle of a mundane forest that was dark even during the day, a mundanely creepy tower loomed, looking as if it were half-buried in a cliff. This was the home of our prime suspect, the mysterious sorcerer.

I shouldn't say this too loudly, but it’s actually quite common for sorcerers to turn to crime for money. Especially the secretive types who do research all alone. Depending on the field, research requires a lot of funding. Unless you have a powerful sponsor or are wealthy yourself, you'll inevitably hit a financial wall. The Sorcerers' Guild isn't going to fund some nobody’s secret personal project.

When that happens, the only ways to get cash fast are finding a sponsor or committing a crime. It wouldn't be surprising if someone struggling for funds came up with a plan to kidnap a rich man’s child.

However, the immediate problem was—

"How are we going to sneak in?" Naga asked.

I nodded. We could use Levitation to go in from the top, but there weren't any windows. If we blasted a hole and ended up burying Rayleigh in rubble, it wouldn't be funny.

"How about this?" I whispered an idea into Naga's ear.

"Excuse me—!" I shouted, knocking loudly and rudely on the door. "Hellooo! Is anyone home? Excuse me—!"

"Hmph! If you're there, you'd better come out right now!" Naga yelled along.

Just as we were starting to get tired of making a scene... *Click.* The sound of a lock turning echoed from inside.

Naga and I glanced at each other and pushed the door. It opened slowly with a heavy, ominous creak. Inside was nothing but darkness. No sign of anyone.

"Um..."

"Helloooo..."

We stepped inside timidly. Then—

Snap!

The ground beneath our feet vanished! A pitfall trap!!

"*Kyahhhhhhh!?*"

Letting out a perfectly fake scream, Naga and I plummeted into the abyss...

"...Ugh... nnn..."

I pretended to wake up a while later. I shook my head a few times and scanned the room. It was a plain stone room—nothing special. Since we were underground, it was damp and clammy.

"Where... am I?" I muttered the cliché line and shook Naga awake.

Now, according to the acting instructions I gave her beforehand, she was also supposed to be faking unconsciousness...

"Ugh, nnn." She sat up abruptly. "Wh-where is this?"

Her delivery is so wooden!

"What are you acting so dazed for!? Look! The moment we entered the tower..."

"Oh, right, that's what happened."

"Speak more naturally!" I hissed into her ear.

"Oh... naturally. Hmph. Understood!" She whispered back, then cleared her throat. "Hah! This is a joke! To think you thought you could trap us with such a childish pitfall! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Just go back to the wooden delivery..." I whispered again. In Naga's case, her "normal" state was already weird enough.

At that moment:

"Who sent you?"

A low man's voice echoed from nowhere. Perfectly according to script. I kept up the act.

"Wh-who's there!? What do you think you're doing!? Dropping people into holes out of nowhere!?" I stood up and shouted toward the ceiling.

After a low chuckle, the voice continued: *"What I'm doing? I shouldn't need to explain that, should I? Hmph. I'm afraid I cannot return the girl to you."*

Bingo! But since I didn't know where Rayleigh was in this tower, I couldn't act recklessly yet.

"Listen, you! I don't know what you're up to, but are you crazy!?" I yelled. "Or is it your hobby to drop travelers into holes and talk nonsense?"

There was a brief silence. *"D-don't play dumb!"*

He was rattled. Definitely rattled.

"Karl hired you, didn't he!? Enough with the blatant lies!"

"...Karl?" I paused, acting like I was thinking. "If you're talking about Karl Dels, sure, we caught him, but what of it!?"

I made up a random name on the spot. Another silence followed.

"...Then tell me. What on earth did you come here for!?"

Good. He was starting to think he made a mistake.

"What a greeting! We just wanted to ask for directions to Maleneid, and you pull this! We're the ones who want an explanation!"

“You got lost?”

"Yes!"

“Along the highway...”

"We ran into bandits and fled into the forest! Is that a crime!?"

Another pause. *“...Anyway. Since you've learned this much, I can't let you leave just yet. Stay quiet in there for a while.”*

There was a small *click*. He probably closed a speaking tube cover somewhere.

"Hey! You talk all that crap and then say 'since you've learned this much'!? Get us out of here! Right now! Are you listening!?"

After making enough noise for good measure... "Well, that's that." I sat down on the floor.

"Hmph. I'll give you credit, Lina. It went exactly according to your plan. So? What now?"

"The problem is where Rayleigh is being held."

"And? What now?"

"If we act carelessly and he uses her as a shield, it'll be a pain..."

"So? What now?"

"Dammit! Can't you see I'm trying to stall for time!?"

"I know, that's why I'm pestering you!"

"I haven't thought that far ahead yet! Happy now!?"

"Yes, I am!"

Seriously...

"Anyway, let's do the standard thing and wait for nightfall. For now—let's conserve our energy."

"Alright—it should be about time."

I stretched and stood up. Some time had passed. We’d killed time with a nap, and it should be night now—probably. Without windows, it was hard to tell. I kicked Naga awake.

"...Mmm... so...? What are we doing?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"First, we get out of here. I'll try to blast a hole in the wall. If that doesn't work, I'll carry you with Levitation and you can blast the ceiling with a Vibration Blast."

"The usual brute force method, then."

"Pretty much..." I replied half-heartedly. Usually, you're supposed to escape with "wit and courage," but luckily or unluckily, we had plenty of brute force cards to play.

We chanted together... *"Vibration Blast!"*

DOGAVO!

Holes opened in two of the walls. A faint light leaked from one of them.

"That way." I peeked through the hole and saw a short hallway lined with doors.

"Hmm..." A magical "Light" spell cast at the end of the hall cast a dim glow. Even after that loud blast, no one seemed to be coming. No guards. But the fact that there was a light meant—someone was behind one of those doors.

Probably Rayleigh. We stepped into the hall and started checking doors. The first two were empty. The third—wouldn't open.

This is it!

"Rayleigh, are you in there?"

"Who is it!?" A small girl's voice answered from behind the door.

"It's Rayleigh, right? We're here to help. Get away from the door."

I chanted. *"Vibration Blast!"* I lowered the power to just blow off the lock. I pulled the door open. Inside was a cute silver-haired girl. And no, she didn't look like Mr. Karl. Just for the record.

"Your father asked us to save you."

She must have been terrified, but she didn't shed a single tear, just stared at us with wide eyes. She was quite brave.

"Papa asked you?"

"Yes. I'm Lina. This is Naga."

"...I see. So you're like temporary hired servants."

Twitch. My temple throbbed, but she was just a kid. It would be immature to get angry at a child.

"I'll thank you for the rescue, but please at least call me 'Lady Rayleigh.' I'm the daughter of your sponsor, after all. You might think I'm cheeky, but this is the reality of a capitalist society."

Snap.

"Listen here, 'Lady' Rayleigh," I said, grabbing her shoulders firmly. "I could just report to your father that by the time we got here, you were already at the bottom of a river."

"O-onee-chan... your eyes are scary..." Her face twitched.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! How immature, Lina! Getting worked up over a child's words! Actually, kids should be spunky like this. She's got a good head on her shoulders. She's just like I was as a child!"

"...Rayleigh... do you really want to end up like *that* in the future?"

Rayleigh turned her head toward Naga with a creak exactly like Mr. Karl's, then turned back to me. "...I think... I'll try to walk the path of a better person..."

Glad we're on the same page.

"Anyway—let's get out of here."

"Wait!" Rayleigh stopped me.

"What now?"

"If I go back empty-handed, it'll disgrace the Bryan name. I won't be satisfied unless I take at least a tablecloth back with me!"

"Attagirl!" I cheered. "That's the spirit! 'If you trip, don't get up without a profit!' Even if it's just a tablecloth or a candlestick, you bring back the valuables! That's the merchant soul!"

"Lina-onee-chan! You understand me!"

"My parents back home are merchants too."

"...Aren't you two just being greedy?" Naga, the broke sorceress, chimed in.

"Call it 'rational,' Naga. Besides, if we catch the culprit while we're at it, we might get a little bonus on our reward."

"I... I see!" She was finally convinced.

And so, the interests of the three aligned. The plan to steal valuables and knock out the culprit was in motion.

"...But there's really nothing of value here..." Rayleigh grumbled as we scavenged. She had wrapped candlesticks and other items in the cloak I lent her, carrying them on her back like someone fleeing in the night.

"Well, if they had plenty of money, they wouldn't have kidnapped you in the first place," I said.

We had climbed out of the basement and were searching the upper floors, but we hadn't seen a single guard.

"It seems the sorcerer here is genuinely broke..."

"Mages are just gloomy shut-ins with no life after all," Rayleigh said.

"Rayleigh-chan... you know I'm a sorceress, right?"

"Papa! Papa said it!" She quickly offered a fake excuse. She still needs to work on her nerves.

The second through fourth floors were empty. The fifth floor was a library with a decent collection, but we didn't have time to browse. Then, the sixth floor—the top.

"Shh—be quiet. Someone's there."

Naga grinned, and Rayleigh looked tense. There was one door in the hallway with light leaking from the gap. We could hear voices. One was the sorcerer, but the other!?

"Let's go!" I signaled, and—

BAM!

I kicked the door wide open!

The room smelled strongly of chemicals. A laboratory. Shelves and tables were lined with bottles of various reagents. Two men were inside. One was a typical hooded sorcerer. The other was—

"You... Crane!?" Rayleigh’s sharp voice echoed.

The man smirked. "Well, well, Lady Rayleigh... I never imagined you'd make it this far."

"So—you're the one who talked this sorcerer into kidnapping me! Why!?"

"Hmph... I may have embezzled a bit of the shop's funds. I needed a lump sum of money to cover the hole."

"How could you!?"

Their glares practically sparked! But then—

"Who's that guy?" Naga's blunt question ruined the tension.

"H-hey, Naga! Don't ask that now!" I whispered.

"But I don't know him, so what can I do? Do you know him, Lina?"

"No... but there's such a thing as 'reading the room'!"

"He's my father's accountant!" Rayleigh cut in.

"Oh..." Naga scratched her head, unimpressed.

"Don't just say 'oh'! This is the 'He was the mastermind all along!' scene! Show some excitement!"

"I don't know the guy, so I can't be excited..." Naga looked troubled. A white, awkward silence filled the room.

"Um, anyway..." The sorcerer cleared his throat. "This is getting us nowhere... can we just pretend it was 'exciting' and move on?"

"...Fine," Rayleigh agreed reluctantly.

"Right. Then..." I pointed at Crane. "Aha! So you were the mastermind, Crane!"

"Hah! I had a feeling it was you all along!" Naga joined in.

"...That's a bit too obvious," Rayleigh critiqued our acting.

"Dammit! How did they escape!? Hannibal! This is your blunder!" Crane shouted at the sorcerer.

"In that case—I'll have to finish them all off at once," Hannibal muttered.

Ho-hooo. Interesting. Let's see how he plans to "finish off" me—the genius Lina Inverse—and the tactless Naga. The sorcerer pointed at us and shouted:

"Good luck, Crane-dono!"

"YOU go!" Crane kicked him in the rear.

But the sorcerer stood tall. "Hmph! Don't overrate me! I, Hannibal the Sorcerer, am great at kidnapping children, but I haven't the strength to fight a proper opponent head-on!"

Wow... He’s really leaning into being a low-life...

"You bastard! You're a sorcerer, aren't you!? If you don't have power, at least use your wits!"

"Of course! I don't intend to be defeated so easily!" Hannibal grabbed two bottles of chemicals and poured one into the other. "Hmph. Little girls. Do you have any idea what this is?"

"Not a clue," Naga said bluntly.

"It’s an explosive." The sorcerer poured a tiny drop on the floor.

BOOM!

A loud blast tore a small hole in the stone floor.

"Heh heh heh... Now, what will it be? I have enough here to blow up this entire floor. Will you die with us, or go quietly back to the dungeon!?" He held the bottle in his right hand and slowly approached us.

"Hah! Don't make me laugh. Do you really think anyone is stupid enough to go back to a dungeon after being told that?" Naga scoffed.

But those explosives were the real deal.

"Wait, Naga. He's serious. He's got the look of a man who’d rather take us with him than get caught."

"But—"

"I have no intention of going to jail either. We'll be giving them a chance to escape, but for now—retreat!"

Without waiting for Naga’s reply, I chanted. *“Vibration Blast!”*

DOGAA!

I blasted a hole in the wall, revealing the night sky.

"Both of you! Let's go!"

"Lina!?"

"Lina-onee-chan!?"

"Stop complaining or I'll leave you behind!" I began the Levitation spell. Naga and Rayleigh clung to me. *“Levitation!”* Together, we drifted out through the hole. We floated for a bit before landing on the ground.

"Lina! What are you thinking!? Running away like a coward!?"

"I didn't 'run away' like a coward." I pulled a small disc, slightly larger than a coin, from my pocket.

"...Is that a Regulus Disc?" Naga recognized it immediately. It was a common magic tool. Usually sold in pairs, if you speak into one after a simple spell, the voice is heard from the other one. It doesn’t have images like *Vision*, and it doesn't work if you're more than a day's walk away, but people buy them for fun.

"I left the other one in that room." I winked.

"...And? What are you going to do with it?"

"This." I chanted the activation spell. My voice should now be echoing in the top floor of the tower. I spoke one word into the disc:

"BOO!"

Instantly—

ME-GIGAAN!

The top of the tower exploded.

"...I knew it... he dropped the explosives..."

"Incredible, Lina-onee-chan!" Rayleigh cheered.

"Hmph! It was a mistake for mere servants to hatch such a grand plan in the first place! Ho-ho-ho-ho!" Rayleigh stood with her hands on her hips, imitating Naga perfectly as she watched the smoke rise from the tower.

...I think the path to her 'rehabilitation' is going to be a long one...

"Still, Lina, that was quite bold. You could have just used an attack spell, but you went through the trouble of using a Regulus Disc..." Naga said with a rare look of respect.

"Hmph. Using brute force every single time lacks artistic flair, don't you think?"

"But... didn't a set of those cost about a hundred gold coins?"

Twitch!

...N-now that she mentioned it, I hadn't thought about the price... And there's no way the one I left behind survived that blast...

But I couldn't admit I forgot about the cost. I kept a straight face.

"Hmph! Don't sweat the small stuff!"

—While saying that, I made a firm vow in my heart. I was going to mooch off Naga for a long, long time.

(Operation Rescue: END)

Fight! Our Great High Priest!

"I hope you don’t mind me asking something out of the blue"

It happened while I was in the middle of snacking on a three-person teatime set for my afternoon treat. That’s when he called out to me.

"Ha... Wha—!?"

I looked toward the source of the voice and instinctively recoiled. I couldn't tell his exact age, but he looked to be over forty. He was dressed somewhat like a priest, in a white robe and mantle, but...

He was about two heads taller than your average man. He had an incredibly rugged, muscular build, and his head was a magnificent, glistening bald dome—whether by choice or nature, I couldn't say. His eyebrows were thin, his expression was terrifying, and to be blunt, he had the face of a high-ranking bandit king.

"I take it you are a sorceress. Am I correct?"

As I sat there speechless for a moment, the man spoke again. His voice was low and raspy, sounding like two boulders grinding against each other. Without a word, I gave a frantic series of nods.

"The truth is, I have a job I’d like to ask of you. Do you mind if I sit beside you?"

Again, I nodded frantically.

"This is the first time we've met. My name is Miles. As you can probably tell by looking at me, I am a man of the cloth."

...I don't think anyone could tell just by looking at you... but in this case...

"Our teachings are a branch of those who worship the Fire Dragon King, but they aren't very popular. Many of our rituals involve... unusual procedures, and because of that, an incident has occurred."

"...I see..." I gave a half-hearted response.

"The position of High Priest has recently become vacant, and I have been selected as a candidate. However, a certain ritual is required for the appointment. The ritual itself is quite simple: I must go to a shrine on a certain mountain and simply record my name there. But—there are those among the priests who do not look kindly upon me becoming High Priest. It seems some have even gone so far as to hire people to eliminate me."

"...So, Mr. Miles, does that mean your life has been targeted several times already?"

"It has." He nodded nonchalantly at my question. "Twice. Both times after I set out on my journey to the Holy Mountain. Fortunately, I was saved by God's grace then, but I cannot expect His protection forever. Therefore, I would like to hire you to escort me to the shrine and back to the temple."

"...I see. But wouldn't it be faster to just track down the mastermind and beat them up? From the way you talk, it sounds like you have an idea of who it is."

"I certainly have an inkling. However, without solid evidence, I cannot voice mere speculation. It would go against the will of God."

...He's surprisingly upright for a guy who looks like that...

Still, a religion that worships the Fire Dragon King is rare. After finishing the negotiations for the fee, I decided to take the job, partly for the sake of my own education.

A fire flickered in the darkness.

"...Sigh..."

With an involuntary sigh, I tossed a piece of firewood into the flames. According to Miles, the rule was that we had to camp outdoors until we reached the shrine. Apparently, it was meant to purify the body through union with nature, but

considering it was supposedly fine to stop at villages or towns during the day, it seemed like an odd rule.

...Well, I guess rituals are usually like that...

In any case, that’s how we ended up camping in the forest.

"——Hmph!?"

Miles, who had been silently staring at the flames until then, suddenly stood up and directed his gaze toward nothing in particular.

"...What is it?"

"A battle." He answered without looking back.

"...A battle...?"

I hurriedly stood up as well. However, I couldn't sense any murderous intent, let alone the presence of another human being nearby.

"...But..."

"The smell. I can tell by the smell."

He flashed a smile that would make a weak-willed person faint on the spot, then pulled several items from his robe. A mountain machete with a blackened blade. An extremely thin metal wire. A dark green mantle that was almost black. And... eyebrow pencil.

"Heh... heh heh heh..."

Donning the dark green mantle and wearing an eerie grin, Miles began to smear the eyebrow pencil all over his face.

...Umm... looking at you from the side, that is incredibly scary...

"...Excuse me... I hope you don't mind me asking something out of the blue..." I opened my mouth timidly. "...But what exactly are you doing?"

"Battle attire," Miles answered bluntly.

"Is that also part of your religious teachings?"

"No. It’s a custom of my hometown."

...He’s a complicated guy.

"Listen, Mr. Miles, even if enemies show up, you don't really have to fight. I’ll handle it."

"I cannot allow that," he said quite simply. "Just because I hired an escort doesn't mean I can let someone else fight while I watch from safety. Neither God nor my own pride would permit it."

...He’s a surprisingly reasonable guy, a rarity lately.

"...And besides..." He continued, his smile becoming even more terrifying. "It's *fun*. Punishing those who defy God’s will. Once you’ve experienced the sensation of shattering an opponent's jaw with your fist, you never forget it."

...I take it back.

...Is it really okay to appoint a guy like this as High Priest? Wait... he said this was a branch of the Fire Dragon King faith, but is this actually some shady cult...?

"——Hmph!"

Miles, having finished blacking out his face, suddenly let out a low cry.

"...What is it this time?"

"It seems the enemy is arriving sooner than I thought. There is no time. At this rate, I won't be able to perform the Battle Dance!!"

Don't perform it, don't perform it.

...What kind of place is Miles’s hometown, anyway?

He stood up and said, "I will hide in the bushes nearby for the time being. Sorry, but when the enemy arrives, please keep their attention for a while."

Without waiting for my reply, he vanished into the forest.

"...Still... I wonder if an enemy really is coming..."

Almost before I could finish my mumble...

"...Oh. They really did come."

Murderous intent filled the night forest.

"——Camping in a place like this is asking for trouble."

The voice came from the darkness.

"So it's you guys," I said while remaining seated, looking toward the voice. "The ones targeting Mr. Miles."

"The previous guys apparently got fired."

As he spoke, a man who looked to be in his early twenties appeared in the faint flicker of the fire. He was dressed like a warrior and wore an eyepatch over one eye. Behind him were about ten men who looked like typical thugs.

"If they can't even handle one measly monk, well, I guess getting fired was inevitable... Hmm...?"

Finally noticing something, the man looked around restlessly.

"...Hey. Where’s that monk hiding?"

"I don't feel particularly obligated to tell people like you," I said, slowly standing up.

"Ho..." The man narrowed his eyes. "Then I’ll just have to make you talk by force... Men! Show her what's what!"

"YEAH!"

At the eyepatch guy’s command, the thugs charged toward me, weapons in hand.

...*Guess I have no choice*...

"Burst Flare!"

BOOOOOM!

With a single spell, the men were blown away instantly. All that remained was the big-mouthed eyepatch guy.

"...N-Not bad...!"

With sweat beading on his forehead, he began to back away slowly.

"Hmph. Fine! I'll let you off just this once! But the next time we meet, consider it the end for you and that monk!"

Spitting out a completely selfish line, the man turned on his heel to run—

"NUWAAAAAAAH!?"

He let out an involuntary scream of terror. Well, it was only natural. Right in front of him, a massive shadow loomed.

His face was smeared pitch black, and he was slowly licking the blade of a large mountain machete with his tongue. He stood about two heads taller than the man. It was, of course, Miles, who had been hiding in the bushes until just a moment ago. Having something like this suddenly appear in front of you—to put it bluntly, it was terrifying.

"A-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa!?"

The man collapsed on the spot, his legs giving out. Miles grabbed him by the collar with his free left hand and hauled him up.

"...Sooooo... is it yooooou? The heretic plotting to kill me?"

As he spoke, he pressed the blade of the machete against the man's throat.

"It's not me, it's not me, it's not me!"

Crying, the man shook his head frantically.

"Lying is no good. No good at all. Hmm? Liars go to hell, you know."

Miles brought his face inches from the man's. In a tone like a demon whispering in the man's ear, he said:

"...This wasn't your own idea, was it? ——Who hired you? Speak. Now. Speak and atone for your sins, if only a little. ...Or... would you like me to send you to God's side? With my own hands?"

"Eeeeek! I'll talk! I'll talk! A guy named Rudolf hired me!!"

"...So it was Rudolf after all..."

A broad grin spread across Miles's lips as he tossed the man aside.

"DOHYAAAAA!"

Without a glance at the man as he fled at full speed, Miles muttered to himself.

"...Kuh-fu... so it really was him... heh heh heh... Fine! He's a worthy opponent! I shall make him realize the folly of defying the temple's decision! In the name of God, I shall cast him into the depths of hell! Kuh-hahahahahahaha!"

...Mister... those aren't lines for a priest...

"——Still, I can't approve of that method."

Miles muttered this to me the following afternoon while we were stopping at a small town for lunch.

"That method?" I asked, biting into a turkey leg.

"Yes. Last night, you blew away those attackers with a single spell. That kind of method."

"I thought it was efficient."

"True. But a spell is, essentially, using someone else's power through the medium of a human spirit. In other words, it is a technique that exceeds human limits. Using it for something like saving people is one thing, but using it to harm others... I cannot approve."

"...Is that also a 'divine teaching'?"

"It is."

...Well, I guess his logic is consistent, in a way...

"...But then, why did you hire a sorceress like me as an escort?"

"To counter the enemy should they hire a sorceress."

...I see.

"However, fundamentally, a conflict between humans should be resolved using only the power humans naturally possess."

...Huh?

"Yes! Combat should be limited to hand-to-hand fighting! Weapons should be no longer than a mountain machete! Anything longer than that lacks the proper... feel!"

Hey now.

"After all, the true thrill lies in punching and kicking! The flowing blood! The sharp sound of bones snapping!"

"Hey! Wait! A little quieter, please!"

As he got more excited, Miles's voice grew louder. The terrified stares of the other customers were really starting to sting.

"Found you! You bastards!"

A voice from the shop entrance interrupted his passionate speech. I looked over and saw yesterday's big-mouthed eyepatch guy.

"...Oh... it's you again..." I continued eating, unbothered.

"Wait! Don't just brush me off like that! I've come to pay you back for yesterday!"

...I'll give him credit for tenacity, but he's a slow learner.

Or—had he obtained a trump card against us?

"Oho. The fellow from yesterday."

Miles stood up from his seat with glee. Behind the eyepatch guy were, as expected, about ten thugs.

"Listen. Don't use magic," Miles told me, joy hidden beneath his low voice. "I shall deliver heaven's judgment upon these men myself. With these fists. ...Heh heh heh heh..."

"...Umm, excuse me, sir—"

"I'm telling you now!" Eyepatch guy interrupted the shopkeeper. "Don't think it'll go like yesterday! I'm gonna make you regret it today!"

"...What exactly is different from yesterday?"

"Heh! Can't you see for yourself!?" Eyepatch guy puffed out his chest proudly at my question. "There are *three more* people than yesterday!"

"Who cares!?"

SMACK!

My cup instinctively flew and struck the eyepatch guy square in the head. *...I didn't actually think it would hit him... usually, you'd dodge or something.*

"Y-You...! You actually did it! I don't care anymore, get 'em!"

"YEAH!"

The thugs swarmed into the shop.

"My shop..." The shopkeeper's voice was drowned out by the screams of the other customers.

"You scoundrels! Attacking so suddenly! I haven't even prepared my battle attire, let alone performed the Battle Dance! You boors! Heaven's Punishment!"

WHAM!

The table Miles threw—along with all the food on it—smashed into the first few thugs, knocking them down!

AAAAH! How could you!? There were still fries and salad left!!

Anyway, once it started, there was no stopping it. A massive brawl broke out, dragging in innocent bystanders. In this situation, even without Miles's warning, I couldn't use offensive magic. I swung a nearby chair and smacked someone in the face as they rushed toward me.

...I really hope that wasn't a customer trying to escape...

Miles was roaring as he mowed down everyone around him. ...*Wait... I think the person he just floored was the shopkeeper... I'll just pretend I didn't see that.*

"Heh heh heh... we meet again!"

The man appeared persistently the following day.

After the brawl, I realized the eyepatch guy had vanished from the shop. I managed to convince Miles to leave, and we slipped out in the confusion of the ongoing fight. And today, in front of the shrine we had finally reached, the eyepatch guy and his entourage were waiting for us.

"Heh heh heh... Listen, and prepare to be amazed. Today, there are *five more* people than yester—"

"Burst Flare."

BOOOOOM!

And so, the villains—eyepatch guy included—were annihilated.

"Well, shall we go?"

"...Tch. A bunch of pushovers."

We muttered as we began walking toward the shrine. Just then...

"I'm afraid I can't let you pass."

The voice came suddenly from behind us.

"——So, you've finally made it this far, Miles."

Standing quietly behind us was a man in priest's robes. Except for the fact that he had short black hair, he was a dead ringer for Miles in terms of build, clothing, and terrifying face.

"So you've shown yourself! Rudolf!" Miles flashed a fearless grin.

——So this guy is the mastermind who hired the eyepatch gang!? But wait, are all the priests in Miles's temple this type of person...?

"Heh heh heh... Miles... it seems I must settle things with you myself after all..."

"That's more like it! Come, Rudolf! I shall teach your body that defying me is equivalent to defying God!"

This guy says some pretty outrageous things.

"Silence! The other priests who chose someone like you were simply blinded! I shall make it known that I am the one truly meant to be chosen! Here I come!"

"Bring it!"

"First, battle attire!"

Both of them began blacking out their faces. *...Apparently, these two are from the same hometown.*

After donning dark green mantles, the two suddenly began a strange dance while letting out bizarre cries. *...I guess this is the 'Battle Dance'...*

It was suspicious! Incredibly suspicious! The atmosphere felt like tribal drums might start beating out of nowhere. Having finished their dance sooner than I expected, the two faced each other again.

"Here I come, Miles!"

"Come, Rudolf!"

The two threw punches simultaneously!

THWACK!

Their punches landed on each other at the exact same moment. Both were sent flying backward and hit the ground with a thud.

"NUGAHHHHH!"

"UGOHHHHHHH!"

They roared and stood up at the same time. It was practically a battle between two giant monsters. They charged again, their hands locking together with a heavy thud.

"——Hmph!"

In that moment, a smile spread across Rudolf’s face. And then, he began to chant a spell!

"What!? You don't mean...!?"

A look of shock crossed Miles’s face. He tried to break free, but Rudolf wouldn't let go.

"Y-You... even so..."

Before Miles could finish, Rudolf let go and leaped backward. And then—

"Burst Flare!"

BOOOOOM!

A cloud of earth and sand swallowed Miles!

"UWOOOOOOO!?"

Miles hit the ground with a heavy thud.

"Hahahaha! Did you see that!? The extent of my power!" Rudolf’s laughter echoed through the area.

"Wait a minute!" I said to Rudolf. "Wasn't it against your teachings to harm people with spells!?"

"Laughable!" He puffed out his chest. "I am a man chosen by God! If a man is chosen by God, he is naturally permitted to do anything!"

...This guy makes some dangerous statements. You see them sometimes... people like this.

"In any case, since you’ve sided with Miles, I shall send you to God’s side as well!"

He roared and began chanting a spell. Another *Burst Flare*. He didn't have much variety, but even so, a direct hit from that would knock me out, even if it didn't kill me.

Like I'd let you!

I began chanting as well. My spell was *Dill Brand* It was less powerful than *Burst Flare*, but the casting time was shorter.

"Dill Brand!"

POW!

A massive amount of earth and sand flew up, catching Rudolf directly! *Yes! A direct hit!* Once the thick dust settled—

"Wha—!?"

I let out an involuntary cry. There stood Rudolf, completely unfazed! *That's impossible!*

"Foolish girl! Did you think a spell of that level would work on this body chosen by God!?"

"I agree."

The voice came from behind Rudolf.

"What!?"

CRACK!

Rudolf spun around in a panic, only for Miles's fist to bury itself in his face.

"Did you really think a 'bean shooter' of a spell like *Burst Flare* would work on me!?"

...A... bean shooter... mister... You guys aren't human.

Still, if *Burst Flare* didn't work... I began chanting a spell.

"Go to hell, Rudolf!"

Miles shouted that sacrilegious line and threw a kick, which Rudolf managed to dodge by rolling on the ground before springing back up to distance himself.

"It’s not over yet, Miles!" Rudolf shouted and began chanting a spell. He hadn't noticed at all that I had already cast a spell.

"I won't let you!" Miles charged forward, fist raised.

In that moment, the confident smirk on Rudolf’s face instantly turned to horror.

"——Wha—!?"

He stopped his spell mid-chant and let out a cry. He had probably intended to keep dodging Miles’s attacks while firing off offensive spells, but ignoring my presence was a fatal mistake.

Shadow Bind——

The moment Rudolf started his chant, this was the spell I cast on him. By pinning the opponent’s shadow to the earth with a knife or stake (or in this case, a magical anchor), it seals their movement from the astral side. It’s a relatively fragile spell that breaks if the shadow disappears for some reason, but it's impossible to break through sheer physical force.

WHAM!

Miles’s fist exploded against Rudolf’s face once again!

And so... Rudolf was successfully transformed into a human punching bag.

The journey was over. Miles, having defeated Rudolf, successfully recorded his name at the shrine. I had already received my fee, and with Rudolf defeated, there was no real need for an escort, but I decided to accompany him back to the temple as originally promised.

"——Master Miles!?"

One of the priests at the temple entrance ran inside as soon as he saw Miles’s face.

"Quite the welcome," Miles muttered with a small, wry smile. He turned to me and said, "Sorry, but stick with me a little longer. It would be better to have you testify about Rudolf."

As we waited, about ten priests emerged from the temple. ...*Thank goodness... they're normal humans*. I had been wondering what I'd do if a bunch of people like Miles came out. These were probably the High Priests. Their clothing and the aura of dignity they wore were different from the others.

"The pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain has been successfully completed," Miles said, bowing respectfully.

For some reason, the priests looked at him with bitter expressions.

"...We've heard the reports..." the eldest one began heavily.

"You mean about Rudolf?"

"That too. ...However... even if you were attacked, that string of brawls across the land... we cannot approve of that..."

"...Pardon?" Miles looked up in surprise.

"But listen!" I interjected. "I'm the one who was hired by Mr. Miles as an escort, and Rudolf was the one who started it in the first place..."

"We hear that many uninvolved people were dragged into it as well?"

...*Ugh! Don't bring that up!*

"...W-Well, that's just how it goes. What's done is done. You have to expect some collateral damage..."

"In any case..." the old priest continued, ignoring me. "We have received quite a lot of complaints from various places... and we cannot simply overlook this. Therefore, Mr. Miles. I am sorry, but your promotion to High Priest is being rescinded. That is... hey... Mr. Miles!?"

"NUOOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

"DOHYAAAAA! Miles has gone berserk!"

"Calm down! Calm down, Miles!"

"Stop him! Someone stop him!!"

"...I don't know this guy."

I muttered this to myself and left the screaming chaos of the temple behind me.

(Fight! Our Great High Priest: End)

The Secret Strategy

"Vibration Blast!"

Gogaaaa!

The spell I unleashed struck the Grey Ogre square in the chest!

And then—finally, the Ogre lost its strength and collapsed with a heavy thud that shook the earth.

Daaaaaaa! It's finally over!

Just for the record, if I were simply looking to beat someone up, a mere Ogre—even a big one—is no match for me, Lina Inverse: warrior and genius sorceress. One shot of *Dragon Slave* from a distance and it would be "Game Over."

But this time, I couldn't do that.

"...Hmm..."

I looked down at the fallen Grey Ogre, confirmed it was completely dead, drew the short sword from my waist, and slowly approached the corpse.

"Here's the item."

I said as I placed a small object wrapped in cloth on the table with a soft *clink*.

"Oh! This is it!"

The woman sitting across the table let out a cry of joy and checked the contents of the bundle.

She was the client for this job—or rather, my collaborator, Marcia. She was a sorceress living in this town. She looked to be in her mid-twenties. She was quite a beauty, but—

After confirming what was inside the bundle, she nodded with satisfaction.

"Indeed! No doubt about it! This is a Grey Ogre’s horn!"

"H-Hey, Marcia! Not so loud!" I said hurriedly.

This job—it had to be carried out in absolute secrecy. That’s why I’d gone to the trouble of shaking off Naga, who usually follows me around like a goldfish's tail, just to get this done.

"...Ah... r-right..."

Marcia lowered her voice and looked around restlessly. Fortunately, it was lunchtime. Her words seemed to have been lost in the buzz of the other customers. Marcia stared intently at the Grey Ogre's horn again, a creepy grin spreading across her face.

"Heh heh heh heh... Anyway, with this, there’s only one ingredient left! We’ve taken another step closer to our grand ambition! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

I nearly tripped over thin air at that laugh; it sounded suspiciously familiar.

"M-Marcia! Please stop laughing like that!"

"...Why...?"

"...No, it’s just... I know someone who laughs exactly like that..."

"Hmm..." She nodded, still looking suspicious. "A-Anyway, what's the last ingredient?"

"All that remains is... the venomous fang of an Armored Snake Dragon."

"An Armored Snake Dragon?"

I repeated the name, having never heard of it before.

"Yes. It’s a subspecies of the Needle Snake Dragon. They only live near here. They have a deadly poison that can kill a Wyvern in a single bite. I need that venom."

For context, the Needle Snake Dragon is a type of freshwater serpent. As the name suggests, it has needle-like spikes all over its body. It’s about twice the size of a human and carries a very weak poison.

"I see... So, where does it live?"

"There’s a lake to the east where one lives, but..." She trailed off for some reason.

"Is there a problem?"

"First, the path there is complicated... but I can just go with you and guide the way. The real problem is that a gang of bandits has started appearing in that area recently."

"Is that all?" I said nonchalantly. "Then don't worry! A bandit gang or two is no match for me! I’ll clear them out quickly and neatly, and while I’m at it, I’ll raid their hideout for some 'research funds'!"

Despite my perfect suggestion, she looked dissatisfied. "I don't really agree with that."

"...Why not?"

"Because it’s scary."

I was momentarily speechless at her blunt, clear answer.

"...No, look... it’ll be fine. I’ll protect you."

"But! What if something happens!? If by some miracle we lose or get captured by the bandits! Just the thought of it! I’m terrified!"

"I told you it's fine! It's fine, so please don't suddenly hide under the table in a place like this!"

"...Are you *really* sure it’ll be okay...?"

She peeked out from under the tablecloth, looking up at me. *...Is she a hermit crab... or what?*

"It’s fine!" I declared with total confidence.

"...Alright. Lina... either way, we have to get our hands on that..."

As she spoke, she finally crawled back out from under the table.

"Right, right. Let's get the ingredients together and finish it quickly, Marcia."

At my words, she seemed to recover. Sitting back in her chair, she said:

"Yes! And when we finish it, our future will finally open up!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"...Marcia! I told you that laugh—"

"That wasn't me just now."

She answered with a blank look. *Wait! Then that means...!?*

I hurriedly scanned the surroundings. There, at the shop entrance—with the afternoon sunlight streaming in behind her, stood a single black silhouette!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I've finally found you, Lina Inverse! Sneaking around in a place like this behind my back... I wonder what you could possibly be plotting!?"

"There you are! Naga!"

I shouted as I practically leaped out of my chair.

"W-What is that!?" Marcia cried, diving back under the table.

"We're running, Marcia!"

Without waiting for an answer, I began chanting.

"Flare Bit!"

The dozen or so light orbs I created scattered flames all over the place!

"UWAAAAAAA!?"

The customers in the shop instantly fell into a panic. To be fair, while this spell looks flashy, it doesn't have much killing power. Plus, I made sure not to hit the customers. They all surged toward the exit at once.

"HYAAAAAA!?"

Naga's figure was swallowed up and disappeared in the human wave.

"Wait, Lina!"

Ignoring Marcia's voice, I chanted the next spell.

"Vibration Blast!"

Gobo!

A large hole opened in the wall right next to us. Grabbing Marcia's hand from under the table, I pulled her through the hole and jumped outside.

"That was so reckless!" she yelled as she ran alongside me.

"...It’s bad... especially her!" I said while running. "She’s the one person who can't find out about our plan! You saw her, right!? That... thing!"

"...Yes. I saw." Marcia nodded. "...So that was Naga, the traveling companion you mentioned."

"Yes... she’s a terrifying person who, in a sense, won't let the goal get in the way of her methods."

"...Doesn't the saying go 'won't let the methods get in the way of the goal'...?"

"No." I shook my head. "In Naga's case, if it looks good right now, then everything is fine. That’s her world..."

"I see... In any case, we definitely can't let her find out about our plan."

"Right?"

"But this time... we’re going to wash away all the humiliations we’ve suffered! By completing *that*!"

"Yeah!"

In response, I looked up at the sky for no particular reason.

"...They’re here, Marcia."

I whispered. It was noon the next day. We were on the road to the lake.

"...'They're here'... you mean the bandits!?"

With a voice bordering on a scream, she froze in place.

"...Heh... you’ve got a pretty good intuition, don't you?"

As the voice spoke, a dozen or so men emerged from the shadows of the trees. They were plain-looking bandits with no distinguishing features. In short, they were the typical "jobber" types.

The bearded leader stepped forward. "I don't know why you came all the way out here, but if you value your lives, leave everything behind. And that includes that table."

"...Table?"

I looked back at his words. There was Marcia, shivering under a table!

"Hey! Marcia! What is that!? Where did that table come from!?"

"It-It-It's a po-po-portable table! I de-de-developed it three years ago just in case something like this happened!"

...Are you that bored with your life?

"Anyway! If you cower there, you're just going to get hurt!"

"...B-B-But it's scary..."

Ugh! She's so much work! Anyway, it didn't matter as long as I wiped out the bandits. I turned back to them.

"You can worry about the table after you've beaten me. ——Though I doubt a bunch of guys like you could ever take me down."

"Hmph... big words for a girl with such a small chest!"

"WHAT!?"

Marcia and I shouted in unison.

"Whatever! If that's how you want it, we'll do it by force! Get 'em!"

"YEAH!"

The lackeys charged. But they were too slow! I had already finished my chant!

"Fireball!" ...*Hmph... it's over...*

At the exact moment I was certain of victory—

"Freeze Arrow!"

A flying orb of blue light struck my orange fireball head-on!

Pakiiiiiiin!

With a high, dry sound, both orbs vanished! It was a "Spell Interference" phenomenon. And there was only one person who would do that—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I've found you, Lina Inverse!"

I looked toward the voice. Standing tall on a nearby tree branch was a woman in a costume that completely ignored the season.

"There you are! Naga!"

She stood high above, her mantle fluttering in the wind. "Hmph! Lina, this White Serpent Naga saw through your little plot to hide from me long ago!"

"This has nothing to do with you!"

It was Marcia who spoke up. A clear fire of hostility burned in her eyes as she glared at Naga—from under the table, of course.

"If it has nothing to do with me, then why don't you tell me? What exactly are you two trying to do?"

"Ugh! T-That is...!?"

Marcia hesitated and pulled her head back under the table. Naturally. You couldn't tell Naga, of all people. At her silence, Naga flashed a triumphant grin.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Just as I thought! You're after some treasure, aren't you!?"

"WHAT!? Treasure!?"

The bandits, who had been politely watching our exchange until now, cried out at Naga's words.

"Is that true, Ma'am!?"

"Hmph... from what I can see, it's a ninety percent certainty."

...*Why are you two suddenly getting along?*

"But... if you have no intention of telling the truth, then I have no choice. I'll just have to beat it out of you! ——Teh!"

Naga jumped down from the branch! *Now!*

I had been waiting for this moment! I released the spell I had pre-cast!

"Dill Brand!

A spell that interferes with the earth spirits to open a hole in the ground. The target—Naga's predicted landing spot.

"AHYIIIIII!!"

Losing her footing upon landing, Naga completely lost her balance.

Zogori!

A very painful sound echoed. ...*She definitely scraped something on the wall*... Naga was probably upside down at the bottom of the hole, but—*What the heck, one more for good measure!*

"Vibration Blast!"

Goga!

"HYAAAAAAAAA!!"

My spell pulverized the ground at the edge of the hole. A massive amount of earth and sand cascaded down onto Naga.

"Ah!! Ma'am!"

The bandits rushed to the hole, apparently having decided Naga was their new boss.

"Now’s our chance, Marcia! Run!"

I flipped the table over, grabbed her hand, and bolted.

"Ah! My table!"

"This is no time for that!"

"...But wasn't that a bit much? She’s your companion, right?" Marcia asked as we ran.

"Not at all! This is Naga we’re talking about! If anything, I’m worried I held back too much!"

"...Holding back...? Is she even human?"

"Don't ask me! ——Anyway, right now, we need to get that Armored Snake Dragon’s fang as quickly as possible!"

"Y-Yeah! Right!"

She nodded vigorously. We couldn't let someone like Naga interfere with my—no, *our*—long-held wish!

"——It's here."

Marcia stopped in front of a large lake shimmering in blue-green. *...If the lake was this big, I could have found it easily from the air with a Levitation spell without needing a guide...*

The lake's surface, reflecting the midday sun, was truly beautiful, though the water wasn't very clear.

"...So, Marcia. How do we find it?"

"I've got it covered. They have a habit of dragging animals that come to drink water into the depths to eat them..."

"...You're not going to tell me to 'be the bait,' are you?"

"Of course not. I have a plan."

As she spoke, she unhooked a leather canteen from her waist and opened it. Walking to the edge of the lake...

Drip... drip...

A dark red color began to mix into the blue of the lake. The smell of blood drifted on the wind.

"...Is that...?"

"Sheep's blood."

I see. She was going to lure the Armored Snake Dragon out with the scent.

"There. That should do it."

After pouring every last drop into the lake, she stepped away from the water, took something out of her backpack, and began assembling it.

It's another table...

"...Umm... Marcia..."

"Oh, this? I made it just in case something like this happened..."

"...I've heard enough..." I muttered tiredly. She'd probably call it "Assembled Table No. 2" or something.

"Now, we just wait."

"Wait? We don't have time to be so leisurely..." At any moment, a revived Naga could come attacking.

"It’s okay. I don't think it will take long. It’s sensitive to the smell of blood. Speaking of which—look."

I turned at her words. A small ripple appeared on the water's surface. *It’s here already!?*

I hurried to the water's edge and began chanting. As soon as it appeared, I’d hit it with a *Vibration Blast*. As long as I didn't hit the head where the venomous fangs were, it would be fine.

And then—!

SPLASH!

"MYOGEEEE!"

It emerged from the lake with a roar and a massive spray of water! For a moment, I stood there, forgetting to even release my spell.

It’s HUGE!

Just the height of its neck raised from the water was as long as a whole Needle Snake Dragon. It was as thick as a log. The rest of it was hidden underwater, but its total length was probably enough to wrap around a small house. As the name suggested, its entire body was covered in armor-like scales—

——This is no time for observation!

"Take this! Vibration Blast!"

But my spell only managed to shatter a single scale of its armor.

"SHOGEGEEEE!"

Still, it must have hurt. With eyes full of rage, it lunged toward me!

"UWAAAAAAA!"

I scrambled away, with Marcia running right beside me. Behind us, I heard the sound of a table being crushed by the dragon.

"Lina! What are you doing running away!?"

"Because! This is different from what you said! You said it was a relative of the Needle Snake Dragon, so I thought it would be smaller!"

"Now that you mention it, I feel like I forgot to mention something!"

"You think!?"

"But running away won't help!"

"I know that!"

"I have one more table, though!"

"HOW IS THAT GOING TO HELP!?"

Defeating it with *Vibration Blast* was probably impossible. Even if I broke the scales, the fat and muscle would act as a cushion. It would take too many hits, and it would likely escape into the water before I finished it. On the other hand, if I used a powerful spell like *Dragon Slave*, the venomous fangs I was after would be destroyed.

"Hiiie! It’s catching up!"

I looked back at her scream; the dragon's jaws were right behind us!

"Marcia! Into the forest!"

"Got it!"

We pushed through the brush and dove into the woods. However—

Zazazazazazaza!

The Armored Snake Dragon continued to weave through the trees, still chasing us! *Ugh! How persistent!* ...Wait, in this situation!

I began my chant. Turning around, I pressed my right palm against a nearby tree trunk.

"Van Rail!"

Using my hand as the starting point, countless threads of ice raced across the tree trunk and the ground. As soon as the ice tentacles touched it, the Armored Snake Dragon’s body was instantly turned into an ice statue.

Only part of its torso was frozen. It was still alive, but with the surrounding vegetation frozen along with it, it couldn't move. *Now!*

"Vibration Blast!"

My spell pulverized the frozen, hardened torso of the Armored Snake Dragon!

"...We did it..."

Looking down at the motionless corpse of the dragon, Marcia whispered with deep emotion. "Kuku! Finally! Finally, our long-held wish of many years will be fulfilled!"

"Hmph! I wonder if it will really go that well!"

"What...!!"

I turned at the sudden voice. There stood Naga and the group of bandits from earlier!

"Lina... your companion seems to have become friends with the bandits..." Marcia said, assembling her third portable table.

"That’s just who Naga is."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I’ve finally caught up! Lina Inverse! I don't know what you’re playing at here, but this time, you’re going to tell me where the treasure is!"

"It's not treasure... though I doubt you’d believe me even if I told you..." I said, staring straight into Naga's eyes.

——It would be easy to tell the truth and convince Naga. But—I couldn't say it. Not that. If I said it, Naga would surely—

"Hmph! Anyone who’d believe that must be crazy! ...Now... what will it be!? Will you quietly let me join the treasure hunt, or else..."

"Wait! Please wait!" It was Marcia who spoke up. "Lina is only helping me gather ingredients for a medicine I’m making!"

"Marcia!!"

She ignored my attempt to stop her and continued. "This Armored Snake Dragon is one of the ingredients for that medicine! So please! Don't interfere!"

"...Hmph... Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga suddenly burst into loud laughter at her words. "Medicine ingredients!! Hmph! If you’re going to lie, at least think of something better! If that were true, why would you go to such lengths to hide it from me!?"

"Ugh...! T-That’s...! ——Someone like you wouldn't understand our feelings!"

From a third party's perspective, it was a completely nonsensical thing to say.

"Now you’re talking nonsense! ...Fine. if you won't talk, I’ll make you want to talk! Men!"

"YEAH!"

At Naga’s command, the bandits drew their weapons and charged. ——If this were an open field, I could end this with a single *Burst Flare* or *Dill Brand*, but with all these trees, I couldn't use those. In that case—

"Flare Bit!"

Chugogogowa!

The bandits were momentarily engulfed in flames by my indiscriminate, wide-range spell.

"UDE-RYO-DOWA-AAAH!!"

Like I used in the restaurant, it looked flashy but didn't have much heat. It wouldn't start a forest fire. But it was more than enough to break the morale of the spineless bandits. They all scattered in an instant, screaming.

"...Hmph... a fragile relationship you had there, Naga."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Did you really think you won just by chasing off those guys!? The real battle starts now!"

She began her chant. "Freeze Arrow!"

I easily dodged the dozen or so bolts of cold by hiding behind a tree trunk. *Now it’s my turn!*

I pulled a knife from my robe and threw it at Naga's feet!

"——Shadow Bind!?"

Naga shouted and leaped back. But that was exactly what I wanted!

"Elmekia Lance!"

A spell that deals direct damage to the opponent's astral side. The knife at her feet was just a feint. There was no way she could dodge in time!

But then!

"Hmph!"

Naga drew a short sword from her back and slashed at the air! The moment the sword swung through the flying *Elmekia Lance*—

Buju!

With a dull sound, the lance of light vanished without a trace!

"Wha—!?" I froze in shock.

Naturally, a normal short sword couldn't do that. ——*A Magic Sword!?* I cursed inwardly. I had thought Naga's sword was just a prop for her "look" until now. During my shock, Naga had already started her next spell!

"Vibration Blast!"

There was no way a spell like that would hit me. I easily dodged it. But then...

Gago!

"Kyau!!"

Behind me, I heard the heavy sound of something breaking and Marcia's scream!

"Oh no! Marcia!"

I looked back. She was safe, but the ground next to her had been gouged out. ——Right next to the Armored Snake Dragon's head.

This is bad! I hurriedly moved. But—

"Heh! It's no use running, Lina Inverse!" Naga shouted triumphantly. "If you run, I'll blow that big snake's head to pieces with my magic!"

"——What!!"

She noticed!! I had no choice but to stop. ...*Damn it... Naga is usually so dense, but she's strangely sharp in all the wrong places.*

"Whether your story from earlier is true or not, it seems that snake is very important to you two..." With a greasy smile, she continued, "...Now... tell me the truth this time. If you try to lie, I'll crush its head!"

"Ugh..." I stood there, helpless.

"——Alright... I’ll tell you..."

It was Marcia who crawled out from under the table.

"Marcia!!"

"...Let's just give up, Lina. They’ll find out sooner or later anyway..." She stared at me with quiet, resigned eyes. Turning back to Naga, she said:

"In a sense, it might indeed be called a treasure. However—it’s also true that I am making a medicine, as I said before."

"In other words—that medicine is the treasure?"

"Yes—to us." Marcia nodded.

"...To you? ——So... what is it? This medicine?"

Marcia took a deep breath and spoke with determination.

"...It’s medicine to make your breasts bigger..."

The next moment—just as I expected—Naga burst into uncontrollable laughter.

...*Damn it all*.

Apparently, it was about four years ago that Marcia's former lover left her for a woman with a much larger chest. Since then, she had been immersed in this research and had finally reached the point where it could be put to practical use.

After waiting ten days while being relentlessly teased by Naga, the day finally came for the medicine to be finished!

"It’s done, Lina!"

Marcia shouted with joy in her lab.

"Whoa! It’s done!?" I walked over. Behind me, Naga was desperately trying to hold back her laughter.

"——This is it."

She showed me a dark green liquid in a crystal glass.

"Heh heh heh... as long as I drink this, I won't have to hear things like 'small chest,' 'no sex appeal,' or 'small breasts of the Great Plains' anymore!"

"That’s right, Lina! ...But wait, you don't drink this."

"...Meaning...?"

She gave a sweet smile at my question.

"You put this on a needle or something and give your chest a quick poke. Then, like magic, it’ll start growing right before your eyes..."

"THAT WOULD JUST BE SWELLING!!"

My angry left roundhouse kick struck Marcia square in the side of the head.

And so... for quite a while after that, I was teased relentlessly, relentlessly, relentlessly by Naga over this whole incident...

Sob... sob...

(The Secret Strategy: End)

Dungeon Exploration Records

"Um... excuse me... do you have a moment...?"
A drawn-out, sluggish voice called out from the side on a sunny afternoon. The weather was pleasant, but given the season, the air carried the crisp scent of winter.
"...What is it?"
Naga and I stopped in our tracks. In a normal town, it was the kind of voice you might walk right past without noticing, but we were in the mountains, far off the main highway. Aside from us, the only person around was the woman who had called out.
She looked to be about my age. She was a lovely, somewhat soft-featured beauty wearing clothes that looked like a cross between a shrine maiden's and a priest's. However, her outfit and her long silver hair were covered in mud and dirt as if she'd tumbled over multiple times, and tears shimmered in her eyes.
"What happened!? What's wrong!?"
At my sudden question, she let out a small sob. "...The truth is... everyone..." She pointed behind her.
Beyond the leafless trees, a cave encrusted with dead vines gaped like a mouth peering into deep darkness. The entrance was clearly man-made—likely some ancient ruins buried in the earth. I turned back to her.
"What do you mean? Calm down. Can you tell us the story?"
She continued to sniffle but gave a small nod. "...My name is... Meryl... I'm technically a 'Sage' in the town of Ulan Bator..."
Ulan Bator was a fairly large town, though a bit far from here. I pressed her with another question.
"A Sage? You mean one of those 'Sages' who has no talent other than brooding over useless things by themselves while acting all high and mighty toward everyone else?"
"...I feel like I don't deserve to be insulted quite that much... but yes, that kind of Sage..." She nodded.
"...Actually... this cave was discovered a while ago, and I was ordered by the Lord to investigate it... I formed a party with a few others... we came here... and were searching inside for a while... when suddenly, we were attacked by something..."
She looked down and fell silent for a moment.

"—And then... I got separated from everyone... I don't even know what it was that attacked us... But—if the others are safe, I have to save them... Please! You two look like traveling sorceresses... please help me save everyone! I'm begging you!"
I placed a gentle hand on Meryl's shoulder as she spoke with a half-crying face.
"...It's okay. We won't leave them behind. The fact that we happened to be passing by is surely 'destiny.'"
"...Hmph..."
For the first time, Naga—who had been silent behind me until now—let out an unimpressed sound. "...I say, Lina... are you trying to use that 'destiny' line to cover up the fact that we're only here because you got us lost?"
—!?
I was momentarily speechless. ...Well, okay, I might have been the one who said it would be nice to walk somewhere without people for a change...
"...W-Well... did that happen? Ahahaha."
"Hmph. You can't just laugh it off."
"But haven't you heard the old saying? 'Laugh away your own failures until you die; nag others for their mistakes until they do.'"
"People do say that, but... saving people in a cave, huh..."
"Please!" Meryl cried out to the unenthusiastic Naga. "I can't offer much of a reward, but... oh! If we find any treasure in this cave, I'll give you a percentage of it!"
Before she could even finish her sentence—
"Hmph! We can't very well turn our backs on someone in need!"
"Of course not! Come on, Meryl, don't just sit there, let's get moving!"
Naga and I grabbed her by the collar and started marching toward the cave.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Look, Lina! A solid gold jar! Solid gooooooold!"
"This one's a magic sword! A magic sword! And the hilt is platinum, encrusted with jewels just the way collectors like it!"
"Um..."
"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"
"Ohohohohohohoho!"
We were in a room deep inside the dark, damp passages of the ruins. The magical light from my sword's scabbard illuminated gold items and gems scattered all over the floor.
"...Excuse me..."
As Naga and I were busily appraising the treasure and stuffing it into our bags, Meryl timidly called out from the side.
"What?"
"We're busy right now," we replied without looking back.
She persisted timidly. "...I'm sorry... but did you perhaps forget? What I told you..."

We stopped our hands and turned back with awkward smiles.
"...Don't be silly... you don't have to worry."
"Right, right. we remember perfectly."
"A percentage of the treasure we find here belongs to us, right?"
"...No... before that..."
"Hmph. Is that all you're worried about?" Naga tossed her hair back. "Don't worry about the small commission fee. There's plenty of treasure here."
".....No..... the thing from a little before that....."
Naga and I looked at each other—and then—
""OH YEAH!""
Our voices synchronized as we clapped our hands.
"It's fine. We'll make sure to save your friends while we're at it."
"...Um... are you really going to be okay..."
As Meryl stared at us with dead eyes, I waved my hand dismissively. "Don't worry. We may not look it, but we—"
I cut myself off. Naga also stopped rummaging through the treasure and stood up quietly.
"...W-What's wrong...?"
Ignoring Meryl's timid question, we both stared toward the room's entrance. The door had already rotted away, leaving only black darkness.
—Bloodlust was swarming on the other side of that darkness.
In an instant, it surged forward! Here they come!
The moment the thought crossed my mind, five or six figures leaped out of the shadows. They all had their swords drawn and ready. But their movements were still clumsy! I threw my glowing scabbard straight at the charging group!
"Whoa!?"
They cried out and flinched. Not missing that opening, I unleashed the spell I had already finished chanting.
"Fire Arrow!"
Chugobadu!
A dozen streaks of flame tore through the darkness, followed by a succession of screams.
"Damn it! Retreat! Fall back!" one of the men yelled, and they all scrambled out the door.
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! How naive! Did you really think you could escape the hands of the White Serpent Naga!?"
"Naga! Stop!"
I raised a hand to stop her as she tried to give chase.
"...What is it? Why...? Hmph. Don't tell me you've lost your nerve, Lina Inverse!"

"That's not it! There's no guarantee that was all of them! If you go wandering out there, you'll be walking straight into an ambush. We wouldn't lose, but it would put us at a disadvantage."
"I see... Hmph. Fair enough." Naga tossed her hair again for no reason.
"...Those people just now... probably... were the ones who attacked us..." Meryl said, still sounding nervous. "...Who on earth are they...?"
"Hmph... Bandits or tomb raiders... one of those. More importantly, Lina, what's our move?"
I thought for a moment at Naga's question. "...Well, either way, we can't hunt for treasure in peace with those guys hanging around..."
"...Um... searching for my friends..." Meryl interjected apologetically.
Ignoring her, I continued, "In that case, we just have to beat them all up! ——Oh, and searching for Meryl's friends while we're at it would be efficient."
"...Not 'while you're at it'..."
"Hmph! What a nice idea! If that's the plan, let's get started!"
I picked up my glowing scabbard from near the entrance and sensed the surroundings. There was no sign of bloodlust or presence nearby.
"...Looks like they've run off somewhere..."
Holding the glowing scabbard in my left hand, I stepped through the doorway.
"...So? Where are you planning to start looking?"
"Well... they might have just run away for good after that. Let's head toward the cave entrance first."
Without waiting for their reply, I started walking.

"...Hmm..."
The three of us stopped when the light from the entrance became visible in the distance.
"...Um... what's wrong...?"
I didn't answer Meryl. Instead, I muttered quietly, "Looks like they didn't run outside after all." Then, raising my voice, I shouted, "You guys! Stop hiding and come out!"
Immediately, I felt a wave of obvious agitation in the darkness around us. I continued anyway.
"You wait for us to see the light from the exit and relax... then you spring your ambush. It's not a bad idea, but with your bloodlust leaking out like that, you might as well be screaming 'We're over here!'"
"...Fine then..."
Realizing they couldn't hide anymore, a man's deep voice came from ahead. The darkness shifted, and about ten human figures appeared. They hadn't used magic; they'd likely just been pressing themselves against the walls and floor.

"—I can't talk to you if you stay that far away. Or do you all have faces you're ashamed to show people?"
A moment of silence. The scent of anger.
"—We’re coming over there right now! Just you wait!"
The group started moving. Of course, I had no intention of running. I chanted a small spell under my breath.
"Lighting!"
Bau!
The magical light I released stuck to the ceiling, illuminating the corridor in white.
"...Guh...!?"
The men stopped for a moment, blinded by the sudden light. There were about ten of them, with mismatched equipment and disorganized movements.
"...What, just bandits...?" I muttered, scratching my head.
However, it seemed they heard me.
"'Just' bandits!?"
"Don't mock us! Is that supposed to be a bluff!?"
From among the shouting men, one stepped forward. He was likely the leader—a bearded, common-looking thug.
"...You've got quite the attitude... I like that. For the sake of that spirit, if you leave everything you've got, I'll let you walk out of here quietly."
I let out a sigh. "...Are you a bird?"
"A bird?" The man frowned, clearly not getting my point.
"I’m asking if you have a memory. Or are you saying that the guys who took one of my spells in the back room and ran away weren't you? ...Well, I guess asking your brains to handle advanced tasks like 'memory' or 'reflection' is asking too much."
"Wha... What did you say!?"
Ah, he finally snapped.
"That was just because you caught us off guard! Fine! If you're going to talk that big, we’ll show you our true power! Let's go, boys!"
"YEAH!"
The group of lackeys raised their weapons and shouted in unison.
"ATTACK!!"
"Fire Arrow."
Chugogabobabogogogou!
I fired the spell I had been chanting while the guy was rambling. Engulfed in flames, the men turned tail and fled toward the exit without a second thought.
...Don't these guys have any pride or guts?
"Hmph! Don't think you can escape so conveniently this time!" Naga chanted a spell.

"Don't kill them, Naga!" I warned. We still had to ask them about the treasure and Meryl's friends.
Naga nodded while continuing her chant. It was a spell I didn't recognize, but judging by the incantation, it interfered with the earth spirits—...Wait.
"Naga! You—"
The moment I cried out, her spell was complete!
"Mega Brand!"
The moment Naga touched the floor—
Gogou.
The cave shook.
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Now you understand, don't you!? That escaping from my hands is utterly impossible!"
"THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT!!"
Dogegu!
My flying kick struck Naga square in the head.
"...Ouch... What was that for, Lina!? All of a sudden!? ...Hmph... I see, you're jealous of my talent!"
"As if! You! What were you thinking!? What are we going to do if we're buried in here too!?"
That's right. Naga's spell had raced through the earth and pulverized the cave entrance, cutting off the bandits' retreat. —And ours, too.
"You don't have to be so angry! I went out of my way to set this up because you said we couldn't let them die!"
"Then think half a step further ahead!"
"I can't do such difficult things!"
"Normal people can!"
"Hmph! You make me laugh! To think you would categorize the White Serpent Naga with the commoners rolling around out there!"
...Well, it's true that comparing her to a decent, law-abiding citizen would be an insult to the citizen...
"Fine... blaming you won't make you reflect anyway... Where are they?"
I looked around; the bandits were gone.
"...They probably escaped into one of the side rooms or passages. Most likely."
"...Um..."
I turned at the weak voice to find Meryl standing there timidly.
"Oh, you're still here," Naga said heartlessly.
"...'Still here'... Regardless, I have a feeling we can't get out of here now..."
"I think we'll be okay... for now, let's check the collapsed area."

I started walking, with Naga and Meryl following. On the way, there was a single passage on the right. The bandits had likely fled into it. I couldn't feel any presence nearby anymore. The entrance was completely caved in, now nothing more than a mound of earth.
"...Digging through this... is impossible... isn't it?" Meryl said in a tone that lacked any sense of urgency. "...What should we do... there are no other exits..."
...Hmm?
Anyway, I chanted a spell—
"Dill Brand!”
A spell that interferes with earth spirits to open a hole—essentially a tunnel-digging spell. My magic easily carved a tunnel through the debris, just big enough for an adult to stand and pass through.
"...Amazing..." Meryl’s eyes went wide.
But—
...Go... gogogogokooo!
The next moment, with a heavy rumble, the tunnel I had created collapsed instantly.
"...Hmm... it seems the ground around here has become quite unstable... thanks to a certain someone's magic." I shot a glance at Naga.
Of course, Naga isn't the type to be affected by sarcasm like that.
"...What are we going to do...? We can't get out..." Meryl said with a half-crying face.
"It's fine. We just have to dig from somewhere else where the ground is solid. More importantly—what should we do? Should we go beat up those bandits first? This ruin is big, but it doesn't look like it has many rooms. It wouldn't take long to search the whole place..."
"I have a better idea!" Meryl suddenly spoke clearly.
"A better idea?"
"Yes! Let's open a path to the surface first!"
"...And then?"
"...Um... well..." She suddenly fumbled for words.
"Hmph! You just want to get outside, don't you!?"
"...W-Well, there’s that too..." Meryl nodded timidly at Naga’s jab. "...But I also feel like it's not good to corner the bandits too much..."
"...Hmm..." I thought for a moment. "—Then how about this? First, we dig a tunnel to the outside from the room where the treasure was. Next, we find the bandits, pretend to run away, and lure them outside. Then we beat them all up at once. How's that?"
"...That sounds good..." Meryl nodded.
"Hmph! That's fine with me. Once we're outside, I can use more powerful spells unlike in here."
...You use powerful spells regardless of where you are, Naga...

"Anyway, once it's decided, let's do it!"

"—There they are."
I whispered, stopping again a little later. We were some distance down the side passage where the bandits had fled. Naturally, I had already dug the tunnel to the outside from the treasure room.
On the right side of the passage was a room entrance—a square hole gaping with darkness.
"You two, wait here for a bit. Be ready to run at any time."
Holding the glowing scabbard, I crept toward the doorway. The moment I peeked inside—
Hyun!
As expected, I heard the sound of something cutting through the air and easily pulled back.
"Whoa!?" I made sure to let out a surprised cry.
Clang! Clang! Five or six arrows thudded into the opposite wall.
"They have projectile weapons! Temporary retreat!" I shouted so they could hear me inside, making loud stomping noises as I ran back to Naga and Meryl.
"Don't let them get away!"
"Chase them!"
With those cliché lines, I felt them leaving the room. ——Perfect. They're following.
"Let's go!" I called to Naga and Meryl and started running toward the treasure room with the tunnel.
"They're over there!"
"Don't lose them!"
I could hear the bandits behind us, but as I thought, they didn't fire any arrows. We ran through the passage, through the room, and soon the three of us used the tunnel to get outside. Right behind us, the bandits came pouring out. There were about twenty of them.
"Meryl, is this all of them?"
"...Um... I think this is about it..." Meryl answered. Naga frowned.
"...Wait... how on earth would you know that...?"
"—That's because, Naga—" I leaned in toward her. "Meryl is one of them."
"WHAT!?" Naga shouted. "...That girl!? Why!?"
"The personality is an act! The 'separated from everyone' bit was a lie to lure us into the cave and rob us of everything we had! ——Though, it seems our strength was outside their calculations."
I turned a quiet gaze toward Meryl.

"...Ah... you figured it out...?" She said in her usual dazed tone. "...Actually, that's right. I'm technically the 'Boss' of these people."
"The Boss!?" I repeated in shock.
She knew there was only one entrance to the ruins, she insisted on digging an exit before defeating the bandits, and the bandits didn't use arrows while we were running away. I had suspected she was in league with them, but... to think she was the leader, of all things...
"...B-But it's true that I used to be a Sage in Ulan Bator."
"...Then why on earth are you acting as a bandit boss...?"
"...Well... about a year ago... I was traveling and got attacked by these guys... and I ended up beating them all up... so then they asked me to be their boss... and I... I have a personality where I can't say no when people ask me for something..."
There's a limit to that! ...It seems her personality wasn't an act; it was genuine.
"...So, if possible, I'd like you to leave your money behind..."
"No way."
"...Then... that's fine..."
...Is it?
"Hey, hey, Boss!" The bearded man we had met in the cave interrupted. "That's not going to work! You let the prey go every time like that! If you don't take your bandit work seriously, our savings are just going to keep shrinking!"
Meryl looked troubled and shot a glance at me. "...What should we do...?"
"What do you mean 'what should we do'? Why don't you just work and reform yourselves?"
At my half-hearted suggestion, she clapped her hands. "...Ah... I see... so we should all work hard together, and then use the money we earn to be bandits."
"...Boss... that... that's not what being a bandit means..." the bearded man said, sounding like he was desperately holding something back.
...Well, I can't say I don't understand how he feels... It was clear that Meryl was not cut out for the bandit business (?). ...Then again, I didn't think she was cut out to be a Sage either...
"...So... what should we do..." Meryl folded her arms.
That was the limit of my patience.
"GAAAAAH! Stop rambling!!"
I grabbed Meryl by the collar and shook her back and forth. "You're technically a bandit boss! So either fight us or whatever! If you win, we'll leave our money! If we win, we take all your treasure! Is that clear enough for you!?"
"...I-I understand...!"
"Good..." I let go.
"...Which one of us is the bandit here...?" I ignored Naga's mutter and faced Meryl.

"Come at me!"
Meryl gave a small nod at my shout. "...Um... in that case, I shall use 'Indig Ra"
"——What!?" I was speechless.
Among Shamanistic magic, it’s a very high-level technique. It releases lightning strikes over a massive area—about the size of several town blocks—centered on the caster. Unless you have a weak heart, it probably won't kill you, but at best you'll be incapacitated for a while. At worst, it can cause nerve damage. What’s truly terrifying is its vast range.
She likely defeated the bandits with this spell. —Should I run!? Or what!?
While I hesitated for a split second, Meryl began her chant.
"...Um... to the wind... and the earth... sleep... well... um..."
.....Too slow.....
Just for the record, the "um" and "well" were not part of the incantation.
"WOULD YOU JUST CHANT THE DAMN THING ALREADY!!"
My kick, fueled by my lost patience, knocked Meryl out in one hit.

And so, the "battle" (if you could call it that) ended. Naga and I took the bandits' treasure, handed them over to the authorities, and collected a small bounty.
The only problem was Meryl. No matter how much we explained, the officials wouldn't believe that she was the leader of a bandit gang.
So, in the end, she’s still working as a Sage in Ulan Bator to this day.
...It’s a strange world we live in.

(Dungeon Exploration Records: End)

The Various Ways Of Chivalry

It all started with Naga freezing up.

She had just skewered a piece of fried squid on her fork when, eyes fixed on the entrance of the diner behind me, she suddenly turned to stone.

"What's wrong?"

A split second before I could even voice the question—

"Oh my?! My, my, my, my! Well, to think we would meet again in a place like this! What a profound coincidence! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

A high-frequency pitch I definitely remembered hearing before struck my brainstem like a physical blow!

...Th-this voice?!

I froze involuntarily.

Sinister memories flashed through my mind for an instant, and a cold sweat broke out over my entire body.

It was a voice I knew well.

A voice I would have preferred never to hear again as long as I lived.

However, even as I sat there paralyzed, a massive presence was steadily approaching me from behind.

And then—

It came to a halt right at my back.

I turned around timidly, only to find a gaudy, multi-colored mass looming over me!

Yes! This was the very thing that had once plunged Naga and me into the depths of terror! The ultimate pestilence created by humanity! The self-proclaimed "Lady of a Good Family," the overprotective hag—Mrs. Josephine!

Once, through a convoluted chain of events, Naga and I had ended up exterminating bandits just to help her pathetically weak son, Jeffrey-kun, gain some self-confidence... and to put it bluntly and clearly, it was a rotten job.

"Oh myyyyyyyyy?! It really is Lina-san and Naga-san! Yes, yes, of course I could never forgeeeeeeeet you! Look! It’s me! Josephine, who asked you to look after my son, Jeffrey-chan, before! Ah! Of course, I’m sure you haven't forgotten. O-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The moment I turned around, she began rattling on without pausing for breath.

"It’s just that, you see, I thought I’d have our Jeffrey-chan take up a post as a knight under Duke Luzzatti of this city, but what a Knight Captain with absolutely no eye for talent! The moment he saw our Jeffrey-chan, he said 'Rejected' just like that! I must say he either has no eye for people at all or his only skill is judging things by appearances; either way, I can't leave my cute Jeffrey-chan under a Knight Captain like that, so I’m thinking of putting him into a more prestigious knightly order somewhere else! However, even if I say 'prestigious,' it seems many places place great importance on appearance, not to mention honor and status. I only know such things through rumors, but in reality, there are many such knightly orders, aren't there, Lina-san?"

"Ah... yes..."

Having been suddenly asked for a response, I instinctively chimed in, my mind almost completely shut down.

"Well, as a mother, I have some hesitations about putting my cute Jeffrey-chan into such a place full of prejudice, but since it is his own earnest wish, I feel I must listen. A mother’s heart is a complicated thing, isn't it? No-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! That said, it wouldn't be very pleasant if he were turned away at the gate again even if we visited another order, and above all, I can't have Jeffrey-chan’s delicate heart wounded. It’s true that Jeffrey-chan punished those bandits with your help before, but as one might expect, since the opponents were mere bandits, is it possible they aren't highly evaluated? There’s the issue that the opponents are simply insufficient for making a name for oneself, isn't there, Lina-san?"

"...Yes, yes..."

With my body and brain still frozen, only my mouth moved on its own, spinning out words.

"Well, how shall I put it, if it’s just defeating ordinary bandits, even if it weren't our Jeffrey-chan, any slightly skilled soldier around here could do it, so it’s not an unreasonable story, but then, what if he could perform a slightly greater feat and make a name for himself? Then no one could complain, and of course you’ll help us, won't you, Lina-san?"

"Sure..."

.....

For a moment, something felt off.

Carried away by her momentum, I had nodded my head, but I had a feeling I'd just made a disastrous mistake.

I had the feeling, but my brain, paralyzed by the high-frequency noise, didn't have the energy left to judge what it was.

"I blew iiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!"

It was quite a while after Josephine had left the shop that I shouted and came back to my senses.

"Honestly... Lina, because you went and accepted a job like this..."

"Wh-what? Don't act like it's all my fault... Naga, you didn't stop me either."

"At what point in that conversation was there any room to butt in...?"

"Well... I guess..."

In the diner where we were supposed to meet Jeffrey-kun, Naga and I were amusing ourselves by shifting the blame across a table loaded with food and drinks.

"Hello. Lina-san, Naga-san, it's been a long time."

Eventually, a single young man of about twenty years old walked through the door and took a seat at our table.

...Though, even if I say "alone," there was a high risk that the overprotective hag Josephine was hiding somewhere nearby.

As usual, he had an unhealthy complexion and a spindly build. The light armor, stripped down to the absolute limit, and the rapier at his waist looked excessively heavy for him.

Needless to say, this was the problematic Jeffrey-kun. He didn't look a bit like his mother, Josephine, but that didn't mean he had a "normal" personality.

"You already understand the situation, don't you?"

"Nope."

"Hmph. I haven't a clue either."

Naga and I shook our heads simultaneously.

"...Eh...? But Mama said she explained it properly..."

Don't ask for the impossible. Really.

...Well... it’s true we might have received an explanation, but to be honest, there’s no way we could remember it.

I remember Naga fainting because she couldn't take it anymore in the middle of Josephine's "explanation," though...

Boasts about her son, idle gossip, her own opinions, and necessary information were all mixed together seamlessly and came at us in that high-frequency wave without pause. Asking someone to listen to that until the end and understand it is an impossible request.

"Anyway... I want to hear the details of the situation from your own mouth once more. ...Oh, look, once you become a knight, there are missions where you have to scout something and report back, right? Think of it as practice for making a concise and pertinent report."

I added that follow-up, mindful of Josephine, who was surely somewhere nearby.

"I see. If that's the case."

Jeffrey ordered a fruit juice from a waitress passing by and began his explanation.

"Actually, recently, a group calling themselves the 'Black Knights' has appeared in this country."

"...'Dark Knights'... huh..."

I involuntarily frowned at the naming, which clearly showed zero thought had gone into it.

"The Black Knight is a mysterious knight who has been appearing around here lately, leading countless ogres and pillaging nearby villages and towns. Actually, Duke Luzzatti’s knightly order went out to subjugate them recently, but it seems they were easily driven back. Rumor has it that the Black Knight even uses offensive magic."

"Heh..."

"So, Mama says that if I, with my overflowing talent and everyone's cooperation, defeat this Black Knight, no knightly order will have any complaints—on the contrary, there's no doubt I’ll be in high demand."

...Well... if Naga and I are together, we could probably crush most opponents...

"So, since I can't use spells, I'd like to ask Lina-san and Naga-san for your support only when the Black Knight attacks with spells."

"...Your..."

"Support... huh..."

Naga and I muttered alternately with blatantly disgusted faces.

Just what kind of support could we possibly provide to make this guy win against someone who easily defeated a regular knightly order?

...For example, we use our spells to make the opponent unable to move, and then Jeffrey pokes them with his rapier... (How villainous.)

"Yes. Support. If you finish it with just your offensive spells, I'll lose the chance to show my true strength."

Where exactly is this "true strength" of yours?

It seems his lack of self-awareness is as strong as ever.

"Hmph. Let me stop you right there."

Naga suddenly puffed out her chest and cut in with her usual haughty attitude.

"Lina might have nodded her head in the heat of the moment, but I, Naga the White Serpent, haven't yet agreed to accept this or anything..."

The moment Naga said that.

"...You will accept it, won't you...?"

"Gwah?!"

That voice, whispered right behind Naga's back, was unmistakably Josephine's.

Even I let out a cry and looked in that direction, but there wasn't even a shadow of a person there anymore.

...Is... is she a paranormal phenomenon...? That hag...?

I glanced at Naga; obviously, she had heard the voice clearly too, as she was frozen stiff and drenched in sweat.

"Won't you accept it? Naga-san?"

To Jeffrey, who asked with utter nonchalance—whether he noticed or not—Naga replied with a twitching face,

"...O-O-Of course I'll accept! There's... there's no way I'd do something so sc—I mean, heartless as to refuse?! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Your voice is shaking, lady.

...Well... it's not an unreasonable reaction...

Jeffrey smiled with a bright, satisfied look at Naga's answer.

"I see. I thought so. ...Well then, let me continue my story. Let's see, it was up to the part about asking you two for support, right?"

"The support is fine, but... in that case, should we just blow away the surrounding ogres with our offensive magic?"

"That would be a problem."

He shook his head at my question while sipping the fruit juice that had been brought to him.

"No matter if they are followers, no matter if they are small fry, if you defeat them with flashy spells, that will inevitably stand out more."

"...Even if you say that, I don't know how many ogres the Black Knight is leading, but it's impossible—not that I'm saying it's completely impossible, but it's a fact it would be exhausting—for you to defeat all of them and the Black Knight by yourself, right?"

Of course, it was a completely impossible story, but fearing Josephine's retaliation lurking somewhere, I chose my words carefully.

"Don't worry about that. Mama has thought it through that far and prepared a private knightly order to clear the way for me."

"A private knightly order?!"

Naga and I cried out in unison.

...Wh... What a waste of money...

However, if such a thing existed, it might not be entirely impossible to have them hold back the ogres while Jeffrey, with Naga's and my support, defeated the Black Knight.

If that happened, then at least nominally, it would be "Jeffrey-kun and his companions joined forces to defeat the Black Knight, whom even the regular knightly order could not match."

"...In that case, the command would naturally be..."

"Yes. Of course I will do it. According to rumors, the Black Knight is leading roughly seventy or eighty ogres. Our forces number sixty."

"...Numerically, we're at a bit of a disadvantage."

"Apparently, according to Mama, if we gathered too many, people would start badmouthing us, saying we only won by force of numbers, so she went with this amount. But as for quality, there are no complaints."

I see... she used money to hire experts, then.

"For now, can you show us? That private knightly order."

"Understood. I'll introduce you."

Saying that, Jeffrey downed his remaining fruit juice in one gulp and proceeded to choke on it.

"Whaaaaaaaaaa?!"

At the sight of Jeffrey's private army lined up in a vacant lot on the edge of town, Naga and I couldn't help but let out cries of shock.

Every single one of them was a weakling type just like Jeffrey!

To be blunt, this sight was quite terrifying. For a moment, I thought it was an undead army.

...I bet Josephine... didn't include anyone stronger than Jeffrey...

But that means this private knightly order is useless—no, they're nothing but a nuisance.

"How is it?!"

Jeffrey said, puffing out his chest grandly.

"...Well... even if you ask how it is..."

"No matter how you look at it... this is..."

A careless critique would summon Josephine. We had no choice but to be vague.

"...You don't like them?"

"No, uh, well... oh, that’s right, Jeffrey! Do these people have any actual combat experience?!"

I changed the subject. Of course, if he said no, I intended to use that as an excuse to make them stay behind and watch the camp.

But—

"Of course they do."

Surprisingly, he nodded easily.

"Re... really?! ...So, what kind of opponents did they fight, and how did it go?!"

"The opponents were just a group of bandits, but of course we were the ones who won! There were injuries, but no deaths at all, and we repelled the bandits!"

"...How...?"

"That was thanks to my strategic victory as the commander!"

Jeffrey said, looking very proud of himself.

"I took them by surprise. The moment we encountered the bandits, we all threw down our weapons and apologized while crying!"

"....."

"The strategy worked perfectly! The bandits tucked their tails and ran, saying sore-loser things like 'I've lost the will to even fight'!"

...Actually... I don't think that's usually... called being a "sore loser"...

I desperately wanted to fire off a comeback, but I couldn't because I was terrified of Josephine. I felt a little sad for myself.

"B... but in that situation, how did someone get injured?"

At Naga’s question, Jeffrey’s face clouded over.

"When we were apologizing to the bandits... one of them slipped on something, and he broke his leg when he fell. ...Apparently, he’s always had weak bones."

Hey, hey, hey...

The more I hear, the more uneasy I get...

If the only dead weight was Jeffrey, we could somehow follow up, but with sixty such people, even the two of us wouldn't be able to handle it.

Jeffrey stared intently at the two of us as we held our heads in our hands.

"...It seems you still have doubts about the strength of my knightly order."

Normally, anyone would.

"I understand. Then, I'll tell you. The true capability of this order."

"True strength?"

"Yes. Mama provided the money for this order, but I did the selection. To begin with, since these are people gathered to 'win against the enemy,' they have to be people who can overcome the opponent. So I thought! What is the most important thing for winning a battle?"

"Hmph. It's obviously 'power'."

Naga spat out those shallow words while flipping her hair.

"I say 'wisdom'."

"Yes. I also think it's 'wisdom'."

Surprisingly, Jeffrey said something sensible.

"Power eventually fades, and when it does, it will be crushed by an even greater power. Wisdom, depending on how it's used, can even defeat an opponent who is superior in power! Of course, wisdom can be outmatched by even greater wisdom, but as long as one has the wisdom to know when to retreat, it won't become fatal. —Or so it said in the book on military strategy Mama bought me."

...So it's second-hand knowledge...

"So I used my wisdom and thought! Namely, to take the opponent by surprise at the start! The strategy book also said that this alone can greatly change the flow of battle! That's why I organized this kind of knightly order to take the enemy by surprise!"

...Well... the idea of taking the enemy by surprise is fine, but I feel like there's a problem with the *way* you're taking them by surprise.

"Are you reassured now?!"

What about this is supposed to be reassuring...?

As Naga and I froze in silence for a while, unable to argue for fear of Josephine, who was surely around—

"Lord Jeffrey!"

He must have been one of the private knights. A man even more spindly and with an even worse complexion than Jeffrey ran up.

"According to a report from the guards under Lady Josephine's influence, the Black Knight has appeared!"

This guy has quite a timely way of showing up.

"Right! Understood!"

Jeffrey gave a big nod and looked at us.

"Lina-san! Naga-san! You heard him! We need your help immediately! —Everyone, prepare for battle!"

"Oh—"

The soldiers lined up let out a rather unenthusiastic cry.

The wind howled across the wasteland.

Beyond the swirling red dust stood countless black shadows.

The figures facing us from a considerable distance were the Black Knight and—though I didn't know how he was controlling them—a legion of ogres surrounding him.

The number was about seventy or eighty. Just like the rumors said.

It wasn't exactly a grand army, but considering the combat power of an ogre, it was a formidable threat to an average knightly order.

And to make matters worse, our side was a below-average knightly order. Furthermore, our numbers were forty—about half of the enemy’s.

.....

Well, there were definitely sixty when we set out...

But twenty of them ran away along the way.

"...What? You lot...?"

The knight, clad entirely in jet-black plate mail and mounted on a jet-black horse, said in a weary voice.

"That should be obvious!"

With Naga and me, and a knightly order like raw seaweed behind him, Jeffrey raised his voice.

"We are the Knightly Order of the Golden Flame, gathered in the name of justice!"

...Hey, hey... using such a grandiose name...

"O you who have trampled upon the sacred and inviolable lands of our Lord and committed every evil imaginable! Now is the time for justice's *cough! wheeze!*"

...Don't choke... not there...

The Black Knight and the ogre army were probably dumbfounded. They just stood there silently, staring at Jeffrey.

"...*Cough!* ...Ah, I thought I was going to die..."

Jeffrey took some medicine he pulled from his breast pocket and swallowed it.

"—Anyway, that's how it is, so prepare to be punished!"

Even when pointed at so dramatically, the Black Knight remained silent.

He’s totally at a loss for a reaction.

Apparently, he hasn't had much experience with this type of person.

Hmph. What a lack of life experience. I’ve developed almost a complete resistance!

...That boast just now made me feel a little sad for myself, though...

"Let’s go, everyone! Charge!"

"Oh—"

At Jeffrey’s command to charge, the knights waiting behind him all raised their voices at once.

And then—the wind blew across the fields.

A brief silence fell.

Jeffrey-kun glanced behind him.

"...Ch... Chaaaaarge!"

"Oh—"

The knights' voices answered again.

However, the problem was that not a single person actually charged.

"...And?"

The Black Knight delivered a retort in a cold tone.

With a bead of sweat rolling down his cheek, Jeffrey thought for a moment.

"Hmph! Black Knight! From your tone, it seems you were quite taken by surprise! Now, Lina-san! Naga-san! Please take care of the surrounding ogres!"

"...Hey... isn't this different from what we discussed?"

"To deceive the enemy, first deceive your allies!"

Jeffrey shot back at Naga's question.

"...Tedious..."

Leaving our bickering aside, the one who muttered that was the Black Knight.

"I wondered what kind of opponents would stand in my way... and it's just a bunch of spineless, weak small fry and two women... and on top of that, everyone is an idiot... This wouldn't even be a match for the ogres..."

Twitch.

It's one thing to insult that knightly order all he wants, but catching me—Lina Inverse, both warrior and sorceress—and calling me an idiot, and saying I'm inferior to an ogre... I can't let that slide!

"If you underestimate your opponent before the fight, you're going to have a painful experience."

I let my mantle flutter as I turned and declared this to the Black Knight.

"Ho. Well then, by all means, let me experience it. That 'painful experience'."

Alright. Well said.

"Naga! We're clearing out the ogres first!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

The two of us began chanting spells simultaneously.

"Sorcerers?!"

A hint of agitation colored the Black Knight's voice.

...What did you think we were... until now...?

Before the Black Knight could issue the charge command to the ogres, my spell was complete!

"Fireball!"

Fwoosh!

The orange light sphere I fired plunged into the middle of the ogres, scattering explosive flames all around!

"Whoa?!"

Startled by the flames, the Black Knight cried out on his neighing horse.

The ogre army was thrown into a total panic.

And there—

"Mega Brand!"

Boom!

Naga's spell exploded!

The released high-pressure wind easily knocked down the massive bodies of the ogres near the center of the spell!

With those two shots, we only took out maybe ten or so, but it was enough to shake the enemy.

The ogres were completely flustered, and some were even starting to run away.

Naga and I started chanting our next spells again—

"Bwahahahaha!"

In the midst of that, the one who suddenly let out a loud laugh was the Black Knight.

"You’re good! You’re actually quite good! To think I underestimated you as just two women..."

"Bomb Di Wind!"

Kaboom!

...Ah. He was being noisy, so I accidentally hit him.

He took my spell head-on and fell off his horse, sprawling on the ground.

With this, the other ogres completely lost their will to fight.

Jeffrey might get angry and say the "plan was different," but well, I’ll just have him overlook it as being caught up in the heat of the moment.

—Or so I thought the next instant.

"Hahahaha!"

With a loud laugh, the Black Knight suddenly pulled himself up!

Yes. As if nothing had happened.

He’s quite a sturdy fellow.

"This is it! This is what a battle is! It has to be like this..."

"Freeze Arrow!"

Crack!

In the middle of his sentence, Naga’s ice spell hit him, freezing the Black Knight along with several ogres standing nearby.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! That’s what happens when you get carried away and start blathering!"

Naga said, puffing out her chest in victory.

But then!

Craaaaaack!

With a sharp, clear sound, the ice that had encased the Black Knight shattered!

"Wha—?!"

Naga and I both cried out in surprise.

Recovering from that earlier blast—well, that could be explained by saying he was just lucky. But this time, it wasn't a matter of luck or willpower.

Of course, it wasn't that Naga's spell was incomplete. Even if he were covered in armor, normally one would at best be covered in frostbite or at worst die of a heart attack from an attack like that.

There's no way he should be able to shatter the ice that sealed his armor.

—Yes. If he were normal.

"Heh heh heh... then it's our turn now!"

The Black Knight shouted and began chanting a spell!

This guy! He can use spells too?!

The Black Knight raised the black bastard sword he'd drawn high over his head—

"Dug Haut!"

The swing of the bastard sword from far beyond his reach turned into a shockwave that raced across the ground, heading straight for the two of us!

It was a spell I'd never seen before. It looked like a shockwave-type spell that traveled along the earth, but its speed wasn't very fast.

Chanting spells, Naga and I instantly jumped to the left and right.

But.

In that instant, the ripples racing across the ground suddenly changed direction and pursued me!

What?!

I said the speed of the spell wasn't fast, but that was only in terms of dodging it. It's impossible to outrun it!

The shockwave was closing in!

"Yaaaaah!"

In desperation, I pulled the short sword at my waist and thrust it into the ground!

Screeeech!

At the last second, as it took the direct hit of the shockwave, the blade of the short sword shattered with a hard, clear ring!

I managed to block it somehow, but it was a troublesome spell. If I were to take something like that directly, what would happen...? Honestly, I didn't even want to think about it.

In the meantime, the Black Knight had started chanting his next spell.

However, before it could be completed.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Naga unleashed her spell!

About a dozen arrows of cold air raced toward the Black Knight!

But!

"No way?!"

Naga cried out in shock.

Despite the spells clearly hitting him, the Black Knight stood there as if nothing had happened.

"---I see... so that’s how it is..."

"I wonder what you mean by 'how it is'?"

My murmur reached his ears, and the Black Knight slowly turned toward me.

"The *Anti-Spirit Barrier* and that armor—am I wrong?"

"Ho?! You noticed!"

The Black Knight easily admitted to my words.

There are many offensive spells in the world, but the most popular among them are Shamanism spells that utilize earth, water, fire, and wind. Of course, lightning and ice are variations of these.

And because they are popular, many means of countering them have been researched.

Methods for fireproofing, cold-proofing, and lightning-proofing. And the ultimate form of these is this spell, the *Anti-Spirit Barrier*.

Anyone under this spell will have a high defense against earth, water, fire, and wind spells for a certain period of time.

If you use this spell while wearing armor, you could probably do exactly what the Black Knight just did.

—That said, this spell also has various inconveniences.

First, for example, is the duration. It can't be called long-lasting even as a compliment, and as for defensive power, it’s far from perfect. It’s true you can gain enough defense not to die even from a direct hit by a fireball, but hot things are still hot, and depending on the difference in the casters' skill, you might still suffer burns all over your body.

But the biggest problem is that this spell costs a considerable amount of money to use.

To use this spell, you need a certain magic potion as a catalyst, and the price of this potion is ridiculously high.

A normal person could work for a year without eating or drinking and just barely be able to buy one small vial of this potion—or maybe not.

Of course, various sorcerers here and there have conducted research after research to solve these drawbacks, but I’ve never heard a rumor of such efforts bearing fruit.

I didn't think the Black Knight was chanting that spell—which has a short duration and costs so much—every time Naga or I attacked.

In fact, when he took Naga’s or my spell, he wasn't chanting anything.

That means there must be a trick. Thinking the armor was it was just a hunch of mine, but it seems I hit the bullseye.

Whether the power of the *Anti-Spirit Barrier* was imbued into the armor itself, or whether the spell was cast on armor that has the ability to amplify and sustain the effects of spells cast upon it, I didn't know. But I did know a few things.

"...Which means you must have quite a powerful backer..."

I said, circling around toward the Black Knight’s side.

"Would you care to tell us... who is the mastermind, and what on earth are they plotting...?"

"Hmph! I know nothing of what that person is thinking! My interest lies only in battle and strength! The reason I serve that person is only because I submitted to their immense power! If you wish to hear more from me, then try and defeat me!"

"...Very well..."

I replied with a defiant smile.

But at that instant!

"Found an opening!"

With a voice that didn't have much spirit in it, Jeffrey charged toward the Black Knight!

Aaaaaah! He’s acting beyond his means again!

The rapier Jeffrey swung at the Black Knight was blown away by a weak breeze!

However, the Black Knight must have seen through Jeffrey’s skill at a glance; without even turning around, he easily parried the blow with his left gauntlet.

"...What is this? This person is so unskilled."

The moment the Black Knight muttered that!

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING UNSKILLED?!"

KABOOM!

A single blow from the war hammer of a masked Josephine, who had suddenly appeared, struck the back of the Black Knight’s head!

No matter how much armor he was wearing, this was apparently quite a blow; the Black Knight stumbled and collapsed on the spot.

...Jo... Josephine... where on earth did you come from?!

In the middle of an open field with good visibility, there didn't seem to be anywhere she could hide...

Before, there was a time when Josephine was watching over Jeffrey from the shadows, but at that time, her way of hiding was sloppy and her presence was totally obvious.

But this time, for even us—and the Black Knight—not to sense her presence...

You’ve leveled up! Josephine!

...Well... there’s also the question of what that hag is doing leveling up...

Josephine began lecturing the Black Knight as he struggled to stand up while wobbling.

"Really, 'extremely rude' is a phrase made for you! It's one thing to commit every evil act imaginable all over the place, but what do you mean calling Jeffrey-chan 'unskilled' to

his face?! Unskilled?! I hear that young people these days don't know manners, but to say such a violent thing to someone you've just met, I must say I doubt your common sense!"

"...S... shut up!"

The Black Knight shook his head lightly a few times, but managed to stand up anyway.

Go for it, Black Knight! Hang in there, Black Knight! Don't lose to Josephine!

There's the question of why I was rooting for the enemy, but to be honest, I didn't want to root for Josephine.

The Black Knight swung his sword grandly.

"What's wrong with calling someone unskilled if they're unskilled?!"

—In that instant.

"Whoaaaaaaaaa!"

A cry of shock escaped everyone's mouth.

The figure of Josephine, who had been right in front of the Black Knight, vanished!

And then—

CLANG!

A blow from the war hammer struck the Black Knight's head again!

—I... I couldn't see it! Even for me, watching from a distance, I couldn't track Josephine's movement just now!

How terrifying! The "Lady of a Good Family"!

"Are you stiiiiiiill saying that with that mouth?!"

Looking down at the Black Knight, who was twitching on the ground, the masked Josephine began her lecture again.

"...Ugh... gh..."

The Black Knight groaned softly and pulled himself up again, wobbling once more.

There! Black Knight! Show some guts!

The Black Knight threw down his sword, fell to his knees on the spot, and bowed his head to Josephine.

"—I surrender! ...Please... please make me your disciple!"

..... Hey, hey.....

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you've reflected a little!"

At the Black Knight’s sudden reaction, as expected (?) of Josephine, she wasn't fazed in the slightest.

"However, I make it a point not to take on anything as boorish as a disciple! But well, if you insist, I suppose I could consider it! No-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Please! Please find a way! To me, the only truth is power! Since I have been defeated, I have no choice but to follow my opponent! If you say you won't take a disciple, then at least let me serve as your subordinate!"

At the Black Knight’s words, which were full of nothing but "strength," Josephine thought for a while.

"...Well, if that’s the case, I could consider it, but look, I am strictly just a passerby, so there's nothing I can do even if you call me a master or a subordinate. So, how about this? Will you work as a subordinate under this Jeffrey-chan?"

"...U-Under *this*?!"

BONK!

"What do you mean 'this' regarding him?!"

"M-My apologies, Master!"

He was struck by the war hammer again and apologized profusely.

...Ma... Master...

"I should have told you earlier! Don't say such violent things to Jeffrey-chan, of all people! If Jeffrey-chan's delicate heart is wounded, what on earth will you do?! Anyway, you are to work under Jeffrey-chan! This is an order from me! If you work hard and seriously, we might meet again!"

"...I... I understand..."

By the time the Black Knight looked up again after muttering in a bitter tone, the masked Josephine was already nowhere to be found.

"..... Hmmm....."

Slowly standing up, the Black Knight let out a dissatisfied groan.

I patted his shoulder lightly.

"...Things have become quite difficult... for you, too..."

"Hmph. But don't throw your life away over something like this."

Naga joined in to comfort him as well.

"...I'll try my best to keep living..."

He muttered in a tragic tone.

He's a pretty unfortunate guy. Well, there's no choice but to have him give up and accept that getting involved with Josephine or us was a mistake to begin with.

"Ha ha ha ha ha."

Without even noticing the Black Knight's depression, Jeffrey-kun approached with a smile, laughing in a way that was totally out of place.

"Even the great Black Knight had no choice but to surrender before me, I suppose."

"No, he didn't."

It goes without saying that the back of the heads of Naga, the Black Knight, and me—who had all chimed in at once—were struck by Josephine's rapid-fire attacks.

"I'll tell you this—I'm not the only 'Black Knight'."

The Black Knight said that as his opening remark.

After the battle had been settled peacefully (?), we decided we had to strike at the mastermind, so first we were to hear the details from the Black Knight.

...However... in the circle where Naga and I, Jeffrey, and the Black Knight were facing each other, there was a group of dozens of ogres, and a little further away from them, Jeffrey's "raw seaweed" private knightly order.

To an outsider, I feel like it would be a rather bizarre sight.

"There are currently four of these black armors that person created. One of them is worn by that person themselves."

"---Which means they're a magic warrior."

At my murmur, the Black Knight nodded.

"Yes. But that person is far stronger than I am. In fact, even these ogres don't follow me; they're just being manipulated by that person's spells and are merely following my orders. ...It seems that if they take offensive magic in battle, the balance of the spell is disrupted, and some of them regain their senses and run away..."

"Hmm... so, who exactly is this 'that person' you've been talking about?"

"I don't know the details either. All I know is the name Gordias, and that they are stronger than I am. I haven't been told what they are thinking in having us run amok, or what kind of person they are."

"But you know where they are, right?"

At Jeffrey's eager question, the Black Knight nodded again.

"Of course..."

"Right! Then lead the way immediately! We'll charge in all at once, and I'll punish this Gordias with my own hands!"

He started spouting nonsense without any self-awareness again.

"...No... I don't mind leading the way, but as I just said, Lord Gordias is stronger than I am, and there are two other Black Knights who, while not as strong as me, still possess considerable power."

"Don't worry! After all, I am here!"

...The fact that such a statement comes out so easily is already more than enough reason to worry...

"...Ummm... you say that, but..."

The Black Knight said in a troubled tone.

"With your level of skill, there's no way..."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY 'YOUR LEVEL'?!"

KABOOM!

Ah! He spoke carelessly!

As expected, the attack of the masked Josephine, who appeared out of nowhere, exploded on the Black Knight again.

"Jeffrey-chan has talent! Overflowing talent and genius! And you call that Jeffrey-chan 'your level' or 'no way'?! What do you mean?!"

"...H-However, Master..."

"Silence! If I say he has it, he has it!"

"...Y-Yes, Ma'am..."

The Black Knight meekly bowed his head.

"It’s fine as long as you understand. So, listen carefully to what Jeffrey-chan says. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

A whirlwind accompanied by the laughter echoing in our brains momentarily enveloped the masked Josephine’s body—

And by the time the wind had died down, leaving only the lingering laughter, Josephine's figure had vanished without a trace.

...How strange! Who on earth are you?! Lady?!

"...Hmph... I’ll give you a piece of advice. Careless remarks invite death. Especially regarding Jeffrey-kun."

Naga quietly leaned in close to the Black Knight and whispered softly in his ear.

"...I... It seems so..."

The Black Knight replied in a twitching voice.

"Now. Since that’s decided, will you lead us immediately?"

Jeffrey said in a completely calm tone.

"...It looks like we have no choice but to go..."

I let out a sigh.

"For now, will you lead everyone to that person? Mr. Black Knight. ...Wait, if there are other Black Knights, that name is inconvenient. What’s your name?"

"Call me Garda."

The Black Knight replied, stood up, and pointed toward the south.

"That way. In those nameless mountains over there—that’s where Lord Gordias is."

Emerging from the mountain path, a small plain opened up before us.

Deep in the mountains, far from the villages along the highway.

After nearly half a day of pushing through a mountain path just wide enough for a horse to pass, there stood the castle.

From its appearance, it must have been built more than ten or twenty years ago. It was probably a pattern of finding an old abandoned castle and using it as a hideout.

As far as I could see, there was no significant damage to the building itself. The main gate no longer had doors, but at the entrance stood an ogre on each side, club in hand, as a sentry.

"...Now... how shall we attack...?"

Hiding deep in a thicket a short distance away, I muttered to myself.

By the way, our current force consisted of only four people.

Naga and I, the Black Knight, and Jeffrey-kun.

Incidentally, we left the ogres behind. They are currently following Garda's orders, but that’s only because they're being manipulated by the spells of someone like Gordias. If Gordias found out about Garda's betrayal, he would almost certainly manipulate the ogres again and send them after us.

We couldn't risk bringing along something we knew would become an enemy.

On the other hand, regarding Jeffrey's private knightly order...

Leading the group, whose numbers had dwindled to forty, we had been heading straight for Gordias's hideout...

But the moment they heard there was someone stronger than Garda, that number was halved again, and the ones who still followed easily reached their limit during this mountain climb.

...Honestly... I don't know whether to call them pathetic or just out of the question...

It goes without saying—or rather, it goes as expected—that Jeffrey-kun also reached his limit halfway through, but halfway through, he got a piggyback ride from the Black Knight.

From the front, he looked almost like a back-spirit.

Anyway, through that chain of events, in the end, only the four of us arrived at this place.

...Though, there was surely a fifth person—Josephine—somewhere.

"As I thought, we should charge in from the front!"

Jeffrey said something reckless again.

"I agree."

Even Garda started saying something crazy.

"...Could you... if possible, tell me the reason why we have to charge in from the front, even though we know the enemy's forces are thick...?"

I asked, choosing my words carefully.

The quickest way would be for me to fire off a *Dragon Slave* or something from here and bury the people inside along with the castle.

Well, that method is out since it goes against the objective of "making Jeffrey stand out," but there's no need to go through the trouble of charging in from the front...

Jeffrey puffed out his chest grandly and said in a voice full of confidence,

"That’s what being a knight is all about, Lina-san."

"We’re in agreement."

Garda nodded at Jeffrey’s words.

"Though this body may fall into darkness, I am still a knight. Besides, in the end, I am betraying Lord Gordias, who looked after me. I cannot commit an act like a surprise attack or a sneak attack!"

"Now that it's decided, let's charge immediately! Hyaaaah!"

Declaring this unilaterally, Jeffrey suddenly drew his rapier and leaped out from the thicket!

Ah! Doing whatever he wants!

Of course, the sentry ogres noticed immediately, and one of them let out a loud howl toward the sky.

"Eeei! No choice!"

Now that it had come to this, I couldn't just look the other way. The three of us also leaped out from deep in the thicket.

Recognizing the Black Knight among us, the ogres showed a hint of hesitation, but only for a split second. I don't know how they judged it, but anyway, they raised their clubs and braced themselves to meet our attack.

"Tooooooooh!"

Jeffrey-kun charged in while letting out a somewhat unreliable war cry.

And then!

Flop.

Just as most people expected, he must have tripped over something, as he suddenly fell flat on his face!

A moment of awkward silence. Perhaps not used to such a situation, even the ogres seemed to have a bewildered look on their faces.

And then Garda charged!

"Whoaaaaaaaaa!"

Simultaneously with his war cry, his black bastard sword cut through the wind!

In literally the blink of an eye, the two ogres were easily sprawled on the ground.

—Once again—he’s strong.

However, the one we were about to face, this "Gordias" guy, was stronger than Garda.

Garda continued through the gate—

And there, his feet came to a sudden halt.

Naga and I, and then Jeffrey, caught up.

"---What are you thinking?! Garda?!"

"Do you intend to defy Lord Gordias?!"

Yes—

Standing in our way were two knights wearing the same black armor as Garda!

"...If that’s the case..."

"We won't let you live."

The second and third Black Knights said this and drew their swords.

"...I make no excuses. I will only live the path I have chosen..."

Garda said some very cool-sounding words while slowly closing the distance with the two.

...Well... he couldn't exactly say 'I went crazy because some lady hit me'...

"However—let me tell you one thing. You two cannot defeat me."

"Heh... that might be true..."

"If it were one-on-one, that is."

Step.

The distance between the three closed by another step.

"Two against one is cowardly! I will join in!"

Breaking the intensely tense atmosphere, the voice that echoed was, of course, that of the reckless Jeffrey.

He brandished his rapier and lined up beside Garda.

"Hmph! Now it’s two against two!"

Of course, no one was listening to Jeffrey’s words...

"Let’s go!"

The second Black Knight moved first. He closed the distance toward Garda.

Almost simultaneously, the third Black Knight also made a dash—

"Whoaaaaaaaaa!"

Garda ran!

"Tooooooooh."

Jeffrey! Don't you run!

Clang!

With a hard, clear sound, the sword held by the second Black Knight and Garda's bastard sword literally sparked as they clashed!

The third Black Knight circled around to Garda's side—

"Eeeeeei!"

Jeffrey charged toward that third Black Knight.

"...Tch!"

Letting out a small clicking sound with his tongue, the third Black Knight swung his sword grandly toward Jeffrey.

I had been waiting for this moment!

"Vibration Flare!"

Crack!

Taking the direct hit of my Vibration Flare, the sword held by the third Black Knight shattered!

Just as I thought, the *Anti-Spirit Barrier* wasn't cast on the sword.

"What?!"

As the third Black Knight cried out in shock, Jeffrey-kun charged!

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Snap.

...Ah... the rapier broke...

He must have applied force in a weird way.

"Eeei! You're an eyesore!"

The fist thrown by the third Black Knight as he roared sent Jeffrey flying.

In that instant.

"WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING TO JEFFREY-CHAN?!"

KABOOM!

The blow from the masked Josephine, who had appeared again, sank into the third Black Knight's head!

"How dare you defeat Jeffrey-chan when you don't even know his true talent?! It’s because of such lack of common sense that society these days is falling apart, and that's why young people these days get complained about!"

The Josephine hag lectured the third Black Knight, who had fallen to the ground with his helmet dented and wasn't moving a muscle anymore, with some nonsensical lecture.

The second Black Knight was totally flustered by the overwhelming situation.

"...W-What is that?! What on earth is that?!"

I wanted to ask the same thing.

However, there was no way Garda would miss that opening. He pulled back the sword he had been clashing with, and at the moment the second Black Knight’s body leaned forward.

Slice!

Ducking under the second Black Knight’s body, Garda's sword had sliced through the opponent’s abdomen along with the armor.

"...Ugh...!"

Leaving only a groan, the second Black Knight fell on the spot.

"...Whew..."

Garda let out a sigh that could have been either relief or melancholy—

Twitch!

His body gave a small shudder, and he turned in a certain direction.

There stood Josephine, war hammer in hand, staring intently at Garda.

What she wanted to say was obvious at a glance if you looked at the eyes peeking out from under the mask.

Namely—don't be more active than Jeffrey.

Garda hurriedly said in a twitching tone,

"...Wh... No, I was saved thanks to Lord Jeffrey! If he hadn't put his own body on the line to help me, I would have been in danger! As expected of Lord Jeffrey!"

He was almost completely desperate.

However, she was apparently satisfied with those words, and after a big nod, Josephine's figure dissolved into the wind and vanished.

...The world... isn't always full of things that can be explained by logic...

"...Anyway... then..."

After a silence that lasted for a while, Garda finally spoke.

His voice was slightly trembling with fear, but well, it couldn't be helped.

"...All that’s left is Lord Gordias... He should be in the inner part of this castle."

"...I... I understand. Let’s go."

Flowers of flame bloomed, and the sound of explosions shook the castle.

Inside the castle, just as expected, the swarms of ogres that attacked one after another were all wiped out before the spells unleashed by Naga and me.

Incidentally, Jeffrey-kun was still unconscious and being carried by Garda.

After defeating the surrounding enemies, Garda, who had been leading us, came to a stop in the middle of a certain corridor.

"—It’s beyond here."

The voice he used was slightly trembling.

"Lord Gordias is likely beyond this..."

"It’s finally the decisive battle, huh."

I had a defiant smile on my face.

"The decisive battle is fine, but... what are we going to do about Jeffrey-kun?"

Asked by Naga, Garda and I involuntarily looked at each other.

Whether I put it bluntly or indirectly, in the end, he was nothing but a nuisance. I wanted to leave him behind, but the moment I even thought of saying such a thing, it was obvious that Josephine's attack would come flying from somewhere.

Everyone thought about it for a while—

"—The protagonist is supposed to make their appearance at the very end!"

I said decisively.

"Of course I'd like to wait for Jeffrey to recover, but in the meantime, Gordias might escape! So, the three of us will go and confront Gordias first and pin him down! ...It's true that from what Garda says, it'll be tough without Jeffrey, but I'm sure he'll rise like a phoenix and come rushing to us!"

"Oh—!"

Naga and Garda involuntarily applauded my nonsense.

"Hmph. I see. As expected of you, Lina. No one could take offense at that phrasing."

"Right! Then let's immediately leave Lord Jeffrey in the shadow of a pillar or something around here, while firmly believing in his comeback!"

Saying that, Garda gently laid Jeffrey in an inconspicuous spot.

Good, good. Josephine's attack didn't come.

In that case, the rest was a race against time. Whether the three of us could defeat Gordias before Jeffrey woke up and arrived.

If we could defeat him, everything would be fine. Even if Jeffrey or Josephine complained later, I could just say something like 'He wasn't an enemy worth Jeffrey's trouble.'

"Let's go!"

"Right!"

The two of them answered Garda's call and started running toward the back of the corridor.

Passing through a large arch where a door must have once been—

And then the three of us came out into a large, empty room with pillars lined up on the left and right.

Illuminated by the magical light burning in the room, a single black knight was standing there.

"—I was disappointed in you... Garda."

Gordias said in a quiet tone.

His face was hidden by a black helmet, so I couldn't see it, but judging from his voice, he was in his forties or fifties.

In his hand was already a drawn black bastard sword.

"However, the fact that you betrayed me... means there was someone who even overwhelmed you. There are still terrifying people in the world, it seems..."

"....."

Garda remained silent in response to Gordias's words.

"Well, fine... anyway, now that it’s come to this, I shall personally deliver the final blow! Come forth! Armors!"

Clang. Clatter.

In response to Gordias's voice, over a dozen suits of armor appeared from the shadows of the pillars or from the depths of the darkness where the magical light didn't reach.

"—Living armor?!"

"Exactly."

Gordias gave a small nod at my voice.

"—Now—shall we begin soon...?"

"Freeze Arrow!"

The one who opened the battle was Naga’s spell.

Gordias easily dodged the blow, and several suits of living armor behind him were frozen.

Of course, you can't damage living armor, which is moved by magic, with a spell like that, but you can stop its movement.

Gordias charged as he dodged. With a speed that didn't let you feel the weight of the armor, he came rushing toward us!

The living armors followed after him.

"Let’s go! Garda!"

"Right!"

Garda also charged in response!

Don't you charge!

Sword met sword as they cut through the wind, and the two blades clashed!

Clash! Clang!

"—Guh...!"

Garda took several of Gordias's attacks, but he was still being slowly, slowly pressured.

And before long.

Snap!

Whether it was the difference in the swords or the difference in skill, Garda's bastard sword snapped near the middle after taking one of Gordias's blows!

In that instant.

"Raywing!"

I aimed and unleashed my spell!

"Tch!"

Letting out a click with his tongue, Gordias leaped back grandly. The blow I unleashed struck down a suit of living armor beyond him.

Garda also retreated a few steps and somehow managed to regain his posture. However, now that his sword was snapped in half, the situation was utterly disadvantageous.

...But he really is strong, this Gordias! If it was going to be like this, I should have just fired off a *Dragon Slave* from outside after all!

I wanted to support Garda somehow, but the living armors were in the way. On the other hand, if I were to finish off the living armors first, it would be too late.

—Which means—

"Naga!"

"What is it, Lina?!"

"Go and die!"

Shouting that, I kicked Naga into the middle of the living armors!

If it's Naga, she won't die even if she gets hit a hundred or two hundred times by living armor, so I'd draw the attention of the living armors to her, and in the meantime, I'd support Garda and defeat Gordias!

Oho! What a great plan even if I do say so myself! Everything's okay except for Naga's safety!

As planned, the living armors rushed over to Naga, who had suddenly come rolling in—

"Dill Brand!"

In that instant, the room shone brightly.

"Whoa?!"

Gordias involuntarily cried out.

After the light vanished, Naga was standing there proudly, puffing out her chest, and the things that had been living armor until just a moment ago were scattered around.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! To think you could take down Naga the White Serpent with just living armor! That is simply impossible!"

...She... she could use Dill Brand...

It's a kind of magic-neutralizing spell, and for something like living armor, it can completely neutralize it in one shot.

Now only Gordias was left!

Perhaps getting carried away, Naga pointed a finger at Gordias.

"Hmph! If things went well, the *Anti-Spirit Barrier* on your armor should have vanished just now! Prepare yourself, you no longer have a chance of winning! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

After a bout of loud laughter, she suddenly began chanting a spell.

However, Gordias was also beginning to chant a spell at this time. This spell was—*Damu Brass*.

It's a spell that creates a strong wind, and it should only have enough power to momentarily stop the opponent's movement, but...

Eei! No use thinking about it!

For now, I unleashed the spell I'd finished chanting.

"Elmekia Lance!"

However, Gordias easily dodged this blow too. Simultaneously, he pointed his left hand toward Naga—

"Damu Brass!"

Gush!

The sudden gust of wind sent Naga flying! What?!

"Hyaaaaah!"

Thump.

She was slammed into the wall and slowly slid down.

An arranged version of *Damu Brass*?! Did he give the wind directionality and converge it to create a wind force several times stronger than a normal *Damu Brass*?!

In the opening created by this split-second exchange, Garda picked up a longsword from a fallen suit of living armor. Now it was two against one. Numerically, we were at an advantage, but as far as I could see, Gordias hadn't yet shown his full power. If we let our guard down, we would be the ones to lose.

Gordias took a step toward Garda again—

"That’s enough!"

At that time.

The voice that echoed in the room was the one I least wanted to hear.

With the sound of hard boots echoing, a single spindly figure appeared in the room!

Aaaaaah! Jeffrey-kun?! Why on earth at a time like this?!

"Gordias or whatever you are! I am your opponent!"

Get back, you!

Gordias slowly turned his head and stared intently at Jeffrey’s face for a while—

"Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha?!"

Suddenly letting out a scream, he leaped back grandly.

He looked around restlessly, as if he couldn't calm down.

"Je... Jeffrey! What are you doing in a place like this?! ...Ha?! Which means Josephine is here too?!"

At Gordias's words, Jeffrey also looked shocked.

"Ah! That voice... Papa!"

...Papa... you say...

My eyes turned into dots.

Jeffrey, with a surprised expression, said,

"...I thought I'd heard the name 'Gordias' somewhere... I never thought it was Papa!"

"No, well, there are various reasons for this!"

Gordias was genuinely flustered.

Then, at that moment.

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Darling! What on earth is the meaning of this?!"

In the dark room, Josephine's voice echoed out of nowhere!

"Jo-Josephine?! W-Wait! Wait a minute!"

Gordias threw down his sword and looked around in a panic. But Josephine was nowhere to be found, and only her voice echoed in the darkness. To be honest, the vibe was almost like a Great Demon King.

"SILENCE! FOR SOMEONE WHO WAS ADOPTED INTO THE FAMILY!"

CLANG.

Struck on the back of the head by a war hammer that seemed to drop out of thin air, Gordias was knocked out cold.

"---I was born as the second son of a certain knightly family..."

Surrounded by Naga, Garda, and me, Gordias began to tell his story little by little.

Incidentally, we had Jeffrey-kun step out on my persuasion that there might be things that are hard to talk about with family.

"And so, I was adopted into the Mailstar family, of the same knightly lineage... but that was where the mistake began... Josephine, too, used to be a good-natured beauty..."

"LIAR!"

The three of us chimed in simultaneously.

Gordias Mailstar continued, regardless.

"Jeffrey has no sense, spirit, or self-awareness as a knight, and my wife is becoming more and more inhuman every day... If I even said that Jeffrey isn't suited to be a knight, a mace would immediately come flying... So, to relieve my stress, I organized the Black Knight squad and spent my days running amok... —You understand, don't you?"

"AS IF WE COULD UNDERSTAND!"

The triple kick the three of us unleashed struck Gordias square on the head.

"You say that, but it's a pretty tough life every day!"

"I can imagine it's tough, but show some reflection!"

"You say that, but violence and lawlessness are a man's dream!"

"DON'T HAVE DREAMS LIKE THAT! FINE! IF THAT'S HOW YOU'RE GOING TO BE!"

I raised my right hand high and shouted.

"MRS. JOSEPHINE!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha! She really appeared!"

I hurriedly ran away from the spot. Naga and Garda were also running away, of course.

...No way! Even though I called her out as a joke, she really appeared?!

"...S-Stop! Quit it! Quit it, pleaseeeeeee!"

The gaudy-colored mass that appeared from the darkness grabbed the terrified Gordias—

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho..."

"Hyaaaaah, gyaaaaah..."

Leaving only laughter and screams behind, the figures of the two dissolved into the darkness and vanished.

...Th-That was terrifying! To be blunt, it was totally terrifying!

"...The world... is full of strange things..."

Beside me, Garda muttered with deep emotion.

—After that.

What became of Gordias, no one knows.

(The Various Ways Of Chivalry: End)

Afterword

Auth: Hellooo! Mikawaya Delivery here! I've arrived with your delivery of *Slayers Special Volume 5*!

L: We're all set, thanks.

Auth: *Sob sob sob sob...*

L: Anyway, moving on.

Auth: Hello. I'm Hajime Kanzaka.

L: So, I thought a full-length novel was coming out, but suddenly we've got a short story collection instead.

Auth: *Gah!*

...W-well, you see, the main story is approaching a turning point, so, uh, the planning... or rather, the pressure...

L: In other words, to put it simply—

Auth: Don't say it! I'm begging you! Don't say another word!

L: Heh. Look at him shake, look at him shake.

...But I see. A turning point, huh?

Which means the day my true identity is revealed is drawing near.

Man, time really flies, doesn't it? *Nod, nod.*

Auth: True enough. When I stop to think about it, between the main series and the *Specials*, this is our eleventh book. We've really come a long way... *getting emotional.*

L: Usually, don't people get emotional at the tenth book?

Auth: Hah! I completely forgot back then!

L: ...And now you're getting sentimental after the fact.

Auth: I suppose so.

See, in the afterword of the tenth book, *The Magician's Association Conspiracy*, we did the mid-term results for the second *Slayers* popularity poll. Because of that...

Man, since I only had to write the mid-term results for that volume, writing that afterword was incredibly easy!

L: ...There you go with those lazy comments again...

Auth: You say that, but these afterwords actually take quite a bit of effort!

L: Come to think of it, recently when you were writing two novels at once, you must have run out of steam on the main story, because you ended up writing about "How to Raise a Kitten" in the afterword.

Auth: *Guh!* T-that! That was... purely a hobby!

L: Ho ho. In that case, are you planning to start "My Hobby: How to Make Curry Rice" sometime soon?

Auth: ...Well... I might actually do that...

L: You've got to be kidding...

Auth: You say that, but has there ever been an afterword in any book I've written so far that *wasn't* related to a hobby?

L: ...Eh?

Auth: Drawings, ghost stories, the popularity poll I wanted to try... every single one of them was "half-just-for-fun"! My hobbies are on full display!

L: ...Well, I mean... when you put it that way, I guess you're right...

Though I don't feel like it's something you should be bragging about...

Auth: Hah! You're still naive! My favorite words are "Half-Just-for-Fun," "Harmless to Humans and Animals," and maybe "Suspicious Character"!

By the way, my life goal is to become "Japan’s Most Secretive Novelist"!

My dream is to sit on a veranda, basking in the sun while holding a cat and sipping tea!

L: ...Is that... supposed to make you happy?

But speaking of which, you never publish your photo. Is that also just a pose for being a "secretive novelist"?

Auth: No. I just sort of dislike photos.

L: ...So you're just a selfish jerk then...

But now that I think about it, at various SF conventions, you've been sneaking around participating under your real name instead of "Hajime Kanzaka."

...Around the time the first edition of this book comes out, there's supposed to be an author signing. Don't tell me you're going to "sneakily" participate in that, too...?

Auth: ...How exactly am I supposed to sneakily participate in my own signing...?

L: For example, you could make a "Sister from the Countryside" mask and wear it, or go in a mask and sunglasses.

Auth: ...No... I'm pretty sure the bookstore hosting the event would complain...

And the people who came to the signing would probably be terrified.

It might be interesting for my "author image," though...

L: I feel like the police would stop you for questioning before you even reached the venue.

Auth: *Heh heh heh!* I like it! I love the ring of words like "police questioning" and "interrogation"!

L: I guess if you're born a man, it's a shame if you don't get questioned by the police at least once in your life.

Auth: ...Well... I wouldn't go that far...

Anyone can get questioned or interrogated for actually doing something wrong, but there's no art in that...

Maybe next time, under the guise of "research," I'll go check out a police station...

L: Your tastes are as bad as ever.

Auth: Hah. That's exactly why I can write novels like these!

L: ...I think I get it, but I also don't...

Anyway, hurry up and write the next one.

Auth: *Urgh!* Back to reality already?!

...A-anyway, I'll try to write the next one as soon as possible!

On that note, everyone, let's wrap it up here for now!

L: See you again sometime!

(Afterword: End)